BOND AND FREE.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "CASTE,"

ETC., ETC.

> "Nothing is a misery
> Unless our weakness apprehend it so.
> We cannot be more faithful to ourselves
> In anything that's manly, than to make
> Ill fortune as contemptible to us,
> As it makes us to others."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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BOND AND FREE.

CHAPTER I.

"Is there no life but these alone?
Madman or slave, must man be one?"

It was Midsummer, and late afternoon. The handsome, but faded and dreary-looking, city dining-room had but two occupants. They were as silent as the stray sunbeam that had made its way through a gap between opposite houses, and was burning upon the only bits of bright colour in the apartment — the ruby and amber wines.

This sunbeam, touching the word Poetics at the head of the page, drew the eyes of the younger man from his book; they did not fall again, but absently watched its play upon the decanters, till the other occupant of the room, raising the *Times* newspaper to refold it, shut off the moted beam and changed both the direction of the gaze and the direction of the thoughts of his companion.

At first the young man's face expressed mere annoyance at the prolonged rustling of the paper; but presently his lips moved as if in a vain effort to speak, and his cheek flushed, and then grew paler than it had been before. It was some minutes before the silence was disturbed by his voice; when he did speak, it was hoarsely and abruptly.

"Sir! why did you hate my father and mother? The time is come when I

must know their history and my own name."

Without even lifting his eyes, the person addressed demanded:—

"Who has dared tell you that I hated them, boy?"

"Why will you never speak of them? Why have I never been able to win more than toleration from you? Why do you sometimes look at me as at the likeness of a person you had hated, and seem to shrink from the very sound of my voice?"

"You are a fanciful young fool!" was the short and coldly-spoken rejoinder.

The young man's slight form quivered—there was a momentary wild glare in his eyes, which, when he had exclaimed—

"By Heaven, such answers shall not content me!—you *must* tell me what I desire to know! Why did you hate my

father and mother?"—and waited for a reply, with his gaze fixed upon the stern man opposite—changed to an expression of shrinking and suffering timidity.

Mr. Ireton folded up his paper deliberately, and crossed his arms over it upon the table before he met the boy's eyes; his face was even more grim than usual, and his manner more measured, as he said:—

"Spoken like yourself, Wilfred Mason—'shall' and 'must' are words often in the mouths of children and weaklings! I will try and answer like myself; perhaps you understand me well enough to know that what I say I mean, and that appeal against my decisions will be unavailing. To a certain extent you are right. If you are in the same mad mind as yesterday, the time *is* come when you must learn all that you will ever learn

from me. You have chosen your own course; when you leave this house it is barely possible that we shall meet again —I do not desire that we may."

"You will tell me all, then—now, to-night?"

"Neither now, to-night, nor ever!"

There was a brief silence while Wilfred struggled for power to speak.

"I will not bear this burden of shameful doubt!" he burst out passionately. "I cannot, and I will not, bear to live on in this cruel ignorance; if you will not speak, I will try if Death can teach me what you refuse to let me know."

"A truce to such contemptible blasphemy. I refuse to answer your questions, but did I say that they should not be answered?"

"You have told me that no one living but yourself can answer them."

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that contained in the letter which I shall give you, or cause to be given to you, as you leave this house."

A weight of foreboding fell heavily on the boy's mind; he fancied a measured malice in his guardian's tones.

"For the matter of your name," Mr. Ireton continued, "it was not well that you should be *branded*" (he watched the boy wince as he used this term) "by bearing your father's surname. The name of Wilfred is rightfully yours—that of 'Mason' was given you by me at hazard; you may throw it off, and choose any other name you will."

A pause ensued, during which the demon and the angel nature of man struggled for mastery in Wilfred's heart; presently he said—

"Last night, sir, you expressed a wish, which I must of course respect, that I

should never try to see you, never even address you by letter, after I have left your roof; therefore, I must now, while still in utter ignorance of the past, say all I ever say to you. If you had cause for resentment against my parents, if they had injured you, you have been generous towards their son. I cannot thank you for any tenderness or affection; but all that it was possible for one human being to do for another, the inheritor of a just or unjust dislike, I do believe you have done for me, and I wish to thank you."

"Do not trouble yourself to get up any show of gratitude; I expect none — I am honest enough to own that I deserve none. I opened my doors to you grudgingly, from a mixture of bad and indifferent motives, fully resolved never to open my heart. Year by year your presence has become more and more oppressive to me: soon the air

you breathed would have seemed to stifle me—I should have loathed it and you as the polluter of it."

Wilfred started from his seat, sudden rage flaming from his eyes. This bitter vehemence from one he had always seen cold and calm stung him to the quick.

Before he could speak, his guardian continued :—

"However, it is fruitless to talk thus. Quiet, boy, quiet; you cannot leave my house till to-morrow; I should have spared you those last words. To-morrow you will be free—free to enjoy a fool's happiness in a madman's Paradise. In the matter we discussed yesterday, your future mode of bread-earning, you thought, spoke, and decided as I expected you would—showing yourself weak, vain, ambitious, self-sufficient to infatuation. The position which I offered to secure for you, and which you regarded as one of degrad-

ing slavery, would be a peculiarly suitable and safe position for you. Freedom is not good or possible for the multitude, only for the strong few: if you are not a slave, as you call it, to some external work, you will be a slave to your morbid imagination."

"Had your offer been quite in accordance with my views, I must have declined any further aid from you, sir. I mean to starve or thrive in my own way. I am quite alone—no one will suffer by me, or through me. I think I could give no greater proof of madness than to bind myself to years of mechanical drudgery—what could I gain that would compensate for my loss?"

"Spare me any elucidation of your peculiar theories; reserve that for your young and admiring friends."

"You know well that I have no friends—passing by a name not my own, and weighed upon by the consciousness that

some mystery hangs over me, I have always felt that I had no right to make friends."

"The morbid view of a weak mind, determined to make the worst of its position and to indulge in the luxury of self-compassion; but if you have no friends, who is it takes you to his home to-morrow?"

"Herbert Southern is not a friend of my seeking—he would not be shaken off; but the acquaintance will end when my short visit to Beech Holmes is over."

"Herbert Southern may find some day that he made a strange choice when he selected you as a friend; but now step with me into the next room—there is a little business to be got through before we can part."

Wilfred obeyed. He was obliged to give his attention to minutely-detailed accounts of the expenditure of the money which had been entrusted to his guardian.

"That almost the whole sum has been lavished upon your education—an education disproportionate to your prospects—is not my fault. In this I acted in accordance with the instructions I received from your mother. What views were entertained for you I can only conjecture; no doubt they were firmly based on a firm belief in your irresistability and my generosity."

"You are clever in torturing me—my ignorance makes me powerless to defend my mother's memory!" Wilfred exclaimed.

"To avoid torturing one so morbidly susceptible would be the harder task, boy. If your mother hoped that you would win my heart and become my heir, was that a crime in her? Inhuman as you think me, I am not one who would strive to blacken a son's memory of his mother."

At this moment, as a few times before in the course of those many years, the

boy's heart seemed drawn towards his guardian. Mr. Ireton occasionally betrayed a grim nobility of nature, that had peculiar fascination for such a temperament as Wilfred's; if the stern man had ever, even if only once in the course of years, softened to momentary tenderness towards the boy, subsequent coldness, even ferocity, would never have completely alienated the young heart, greedy of affection: but now the time was long past when Wilfred could humble himself at his guardian's feet, wistfully watching for, or passionately craving, some sign of kindly feeling. The old longing was swiftly followed by resentful recollection of old suffering—of nights spent in weeping, of dawns cheerless and hopeless, of evenings whose gathering glooms were full of unconfessed terrors —of childhood and youth as joyless and loveless as can well be imagined. Re-

calling those things, he had so completely withdrawn into the past that he started when Mr. Ireton, who had been collecting and folding scattered papers, said:—

"I require a written acknowledgment from you of the receipt of this small residue of 50*l.*, and here, on this paper, I wish you to make a few statements. Have I ever lifted my hand against you? Have I let you want for anything it was in my power to give you?—(in my power remember—it was not in my power to give you affection). Do I let you leave my house without having offered to put you in the way of earning a maintenance? Write brief answers to these questions."

Wilfred looked wonderingly into his guardian's face and then wrote, while Mr. Ireton added:—

"I may, or may not, have occasion to

make use of this paper; but I wish to possess it."

"Good," he said, presently, glancing at what Wilfred had written. "Concisely and well put; you do not want talent; all your instructors have spoken of natural gifts and of mental power that ought to achieve some kind of greatness. I dare-say you have admirers, who call you original—a genius. Nevertheless, Wilfred, you are eminently characterless, without strength of will, the pith and marrow of manliness; your peculiarities are born of your weakness, not of your strength; you are variable, exacting, passionate—in a word, womanish. You overvalue intellect, and the advantages of mental culture. At the same time that you indulge a craving for love and impossible happiness, you exaggerate all the disadvantages of your lot, and magnify its minute ills."

Wilfred wondered at this slowly-doled out judgment, while he winced under its severity; he was, perhaps, conscious of its partial truth, though he struggled against this consciousness. He rose.

"If I offer you my hand, shall you take it?" he asked his guardian, and his manner was not without a timid dignity. "I do not wish to carry away the sting of your refusal to touch me. I am your debtor for more than fifteen years of careful guardianship; the debt is a heavy one to owe to a man who almost loathes me. If you are a Christian man, give me your hand, and with it your forgiveness of all my wilful offences. Will you take my hand?"

The boy's voice trembled, and his eyes shone with a womanish softness. Averting his face, after his glance had just touched Wilfred's, Mr. Ireton extended his hand;

it remained stiff and cold in the clasp of those slight fingers. "I wish you no ill," he muttered.

Wilfred left the room, and the house; he needed more and purer air than was to be had in that dingy, dusty dwelling.

Mr. Ireton drew a long breath, and threw up the window.

"They all praise him," he muttered, "but what do they say of him? Not one of them speaks of stern will, of undaunted resolution, or of inflexible principle—not even of the promise of these things—how should the child of his parents have these? Yet without them, what are his other qualities worth? How handsome the young fellow is! If he had been my own son, and I had loved him—" here the speaker looked round the room drearily; he listened, too, and was struck by the dead silence within the house, which seemed the deeper and

more dead by contrast with the stir and life without; as he looked and listened, his thoughts were busy with the possibilities of the past—with things that might have been.

By and by Mr. Ireton took two letters, one open, and one sealed, from his desk. The first he read through, saying, when he had finished it:—

"Yes, I have done all she asked, and all I promised; with what she hoped, I have nothing to do—she was, of course, unreasonable."

Taking the other letter in his hand, he gazed at it intently.

"I would give much to know what this contains—how she speaks of herself, of me, of him, to her son. Truly women are wonderful—supreme in faith where they trust, as in treachery where they are trusted. She did not make one attempt

at self-justification, and she confided to me what she loved beyond life. Experience taught her nothing, and she based brilliant hopes for that boy on qualities which, if they were ever mine, she had crushed out of me."

The latest twilight found Mr. Ireton still sitting at his desk, still holding that faded letter in his hand.

CHAPTER II.

"Then black despair,
The shadow of a starless night, was thrown
Over the world in which I moved alone."

WILFRED threaded the stifling streets rapidly, anxious to leave his guardian's house and the city far behind. The vivid afterglow of a July sunset flamed across the sky; but even when, as he passed an opening towards the west, the burning glory smote against him, he paid no heed to it. Making his way right on, following the course of the dark, slow-gliding river, past wharves and

warehouses, where vessels and bales of merchandise bore his guardian's name—past ugly suburbs, wanting alike in the life and bustle of the city, and the quiet and freshness of the country—he reached, at last, a waste and solitary district—a district of marshy meadow, disfigured by heaps of mineral refuse, some ruined chimneys and hovels, and a disused and partially destroyed tramroad.

Wilfred paused upon a bridge; the city was behind him, the foul and sullen stream crept on towards it beneath his feet. As twilight fell, softly veiling the desolation of the scene, the country wind blew on him freshly, direct from distant meadows where the hay was down, and where that same stream was no doubt clear and fair—fringed with willow-herb, and meadow-sweet, and many another flower.

The only sounds that reached him were

the continuous hum of the city, the frequent splash of a water-rat, the occasional cry of a water-fowl. Leaning his folded arms on the iron rail, he lingered long on the bridge. Fevered sense of impotence, resentment of the oppressions of fate, vague and yet deadly dread of the knowledge to come, triumph in freedom, gloomy forebodings of the dreariness of life—these varied feelings resolved themselves into one overpowering consciousness of weakness, isolation, misery. With strange fascination the boy watched the snaky coilings of the oily stream; meanwhile, in fancy he saw himself plunging into it, sinking, being closed over by its cold blackness. Little search would be made for him, he thought; he would soon fade from the memory of the few who knew him, soon be utterly blotted out of the sum of human life. He repeated lingeringly such broken phrases

and sentences as "absolute rest," "to be as if I had never been," "to cast off this burden of being," "as the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and drieth up, so to lie down and rise not," till a longing grew within him—a longing that he presently recognized with icy horror, and a strong recoil towards love of life.

"Surely I shall know happiness ere I die? O God! grant me happiness ere I die!" he cried, passionately; "I will not crave much—not wealth, or any kind of glory—only happiness and love!"

A light in the sky, a soft veiled splendour, attracted Wilfred's eyes; the moon lifted herself up from the plain, sending a line of tremulous light to his feet along the black water.

The studious, city-bred boy had no familiarity with such sights; he felt as if an answer of peace and promise had been sent

to his soul—a gentle awe, a tender and religious hopefulness, stole over him.

> "The holy time is quiet as a nun
> Breathless with adoration."

> "The coy moon, in the soft wavyness
> Of whitest clouds, doth now her beauty dress;
> And staidly paces, higher up and higher,
> Like a sweet nun in holyday attire."

He murmured these and many passages from his favourite poets; then he cried—

"Nature, sweet mother Nature, take me, too, to thy breast—teach me the hidden secrets of thy being, and show me the mysteries of beauty. Let me be among the humblest of thy priests, to interpret thee to the love and wonder of the world!"

The boy was ardent and sincere; his heart beat loud and fast, and his eyes had filled, partly from the intensity of vague longing, partly from the intensity of his outward gaze.

The white moonlight on the water was rippled with blackness as the night wind rose; when, presently, a cloud altogether obscured the moon, Wilfred left the bridge and turned his face homewards, shuddering with a sudden sense of something not unlike fear.

That cloud soon passed, however; and as he went towards the city, the climbing moon hunted him with shadows which sometimes startled and made him stumble as if real obstacles lay in his path.

"Is it so in my inner life?" he asked himself; "do I let mere shadows assume form and substance, and then recoil from them as from real evils?"

It was midnight when Wilfred reached his guardian's house, and climbed noiselessly to his room—a large, low garret; his own choice—he might have had any other apartment in the house, but this had two advan-

tages—it was a long way from that occupied by his guardian, and from one of its small casements he could obtain a glimpse of the river, winding towards the city, through marshy meadows, from among the distant hills.

It was his custom to study half the night, and his lamp stood as usual ready beside his books; he did not light it, however, but threw himself upon his bed, to watch the clouds scudding rapidly across the moon, and to think of the change of life impending.

To the dreamy gazer the moon appeared as a fair face, now veiled by ebony, now by shadowy, tresses, and now fully revealed. As he grew more dreamy yet, the fair face became his mother's, the clouds were aspersions of her perfect truth and goodness, the wind was the breath of knowledge which should disperse these clouds, and let

her fame shine forth pure and bright, as the moon's face when the heaven is unclouded.

The dreamy eyes grew heavy — they closed at the cool kiss of a moonbeam, and forgot to open.

Some time after Wilfred had fallen asleep a cautious step ascended the stairs, and a stealthy hand pushed his room door open. Mr. Ireton entered, walked up to the bed, and paused beside it. Wilfred's sleeping face was womanishly beautiful; yet even now, when rest relaxed its lines, it would have looked old and worn as a woman's face. Perhaps Mr. Ireton was reminded of some beautiful woman whom he had last seen when her face was worn and haggard. His gaze was a long one. He did not move till Wilfred raised his arms wildly, as if to push something from him, as if even in his sleep he were troubled by that gaze.

In his retreat, Mr. Ireton came face to

face with a something that caused him to start. The moonlight had reached the side of the room nearest the door; it shone upon something erect and white in a dark-lined recess; a woman's bust placed on a pedestal, of the height of a moderately tall woman—the pedestal concealed by drapery, falling from the shoulders to the ground.

"Fantastic boy!" Mr. Ireton muttered. "There is some resemblance — he remembers her, it seems. The brow is hers,—low, broad, and, any stranger would have said, candid; the mouth is hers, sweet and firm as I used to think hers, and the head is set upon the shoulders with the same meek dignity."

Mr. Ireton returned to his study—daylight surprised him there. He left the house early, to avoid risking another meeting with his ward.

Soon after dawn Wilfred was stirring;

two sides of his room were covered with books from the floor to the low ceiling—old books most of them, out of which their former owner's name had been cut; all these he had to pack. Besides his books, he had a few pictures and engravings, and the precious bust; when he displaced this, he took it tenderly into his arms, set it on the window-seat, and knelt before it. Truly he was, what his guardian called him, a fantastic boy—for he laid his cheek against the white face, pressed his lips upon the cold mouth, lavished fond words and farewell caresses upon the inanimate clay. The set sweetness of the mouth, the unruffled calmness of the brow, appeared to pain him.

"Is it to be thus with me through life?" he cried. "Will my heart beat itself out against a cold, unyielding fate? Shall I lavish my all of love and life, and receive nothing in return?"

Still kneeling before the lovely face, he thought of Pygmalion and his marble—thought and gazed so intently that he seemed to see the rose-hue of life creep over the cheeks, the golden tints and gleamy light of life coil among the wavy tresses, the lips grow warm and moist, the eyelids quiver, and the bosom heaved by soft-sighing breath.

A tap at his door startled Wilfred to his feet—startled colour into a face that had been almost as white as that on which it gazed.

A woman, past middle age, and with a face expressive of anything but sweetness of temper, came into the room.

"Your breakfast is waiting in the dining-room, Mr. Wilfred; while you're having it, I will pack your linen, sir."

Wilfred hastened to leave the field free for the housekeeper's operations. Having

taken a cup of coffee, and found that he could eat nothing, he went out, and wandered through the streets, meditating what parting present he should buy for her. Fifty pounds was the sum he possessed with which to begin life; he spent five on a brooch for his grim friend, his guardian's housekeeper.

On his return to the house, he paused outside the door of his room, hearing strange sounds within; on entering, he found Mrs. Smith kneeling before a nearly full box, her face almost hidden in her apron, sobbing violently.

Wilfred approached her, put his hand on her shoulder, stooped, and kissed her cheek, blushing as he did so.

"Oh, don't, Mr. Wilfred, sir! I don't deserve it!" she gasped out between her sobs. "I never thought it would come to this—I never thought master would cast you off like this!"

"He does not cast me off, Mrs. Smith. I make my own choice—I wish to be free. Indeed, Mrs. Smith, you must not cry so; I little knew I had so warm a friend in this house—if I had known this sooner, I should often have felt less desolate in it."

"I've not been your friend, Mr. Wilfred—it's partly that as hurts me now."

"I am sure you have no reason to reproach yourself. I only meant that though you have been kind—"

"Bless your poor heart, that doesn't know what kindness is. It's no use talking now, however—" and she dried her eyes; "be pleased to accept these, sir; I've had pleasure in getting them ready—may you live to wear them out, and many more after them!" As she spoke, she pointed to a pile of new shirts and a multitude of collars lying by her.

Wilfred thanked her, and begged her to remember him, sometimes, when she fastened on the brooch he offered her. Saying that it was not fit for her, but for some pretty young lady, and that she did not deserve it, Mrs. Smith took it, and, as she passed her hand over it admiringly, added—

"The air of this house isn't good air to breathe so many years, sir; it makes the heart shrivel up. I set myself against you before ever you set foot over the threshold, saying you'd bring ill luck and trouble to master; and I've never done what I ought by you. I shall lie awake thinking of you many a night, sir, and wishing to have the past over again—that'll be my judgment."

Wilfred's kind and re-assuring words were only received with sighs and shakings of the head; so, leaving Mrs. Smith to complete her arrangements, he went over the whole of the dreary house, for the last time—lingering

here and there, and feeling something like regret at his heart.

Remembering presently that he had not commended the bust to Mrs. Smith's especial care, he ran hastily upstairs to do so. As he opened the door he saw it lying upon the floor, broken in many pieces. A sudden gust of wind had swung the casement to, and jarred it from its place. This accident struck Wilfred as an evil omen; he allowed it to throw an unreasonable gloom over his spirit.

It was not till he was quite ready to leave that the packet, his mother's letter, was given into Wilfred's hand by Mrs. Smith. Pressing it close against his heart, he passed out of the mouldy house into the midsummer glare and heat. Crossing to the opposite side of the bustling street, he looked up at the ranges of black windows, and muttered—

"So, at last, I leave you for ever—and leave my joyless youth within your walls!"

His one desire then was to find some quiet place in which he could open and read his mother's letter. How many homeless ones of our great cities must, in some crisis of their fate, have been driven to desperation, being hunted from place to place by countless eyes and ceaseless noise. Had he not noticed, as he passed the mouth of a low-arched passage leading to old St. Jonah's, that the church door stood partly open, Wilfred might have sought long and vainly for some place of refuge. He entered the church thankfully: it was dim, cool, solitary, and he had an hour before him ere he need meet his friend, Herbert Southern, at the station.

Seeking out the most obscure nook of the mouldering cloisters, he seated himself on the fragments of a ruined arch, and drew the letter out into the daylight.

Believing that, at last, he held the long desired knowledge in his hand, he trembled: per-

haps ignorance was safer and happier than this knowledge. He studied the fine, free hand-writing on the outer cover, and the seal, on which was the one word "Hester." He pressed his lips on this name—his mother's name; repeated the name to himself—repeated what he firmly believed, that she, at least, was pure, true, and loving; and then, taking great heed not to break the seal, he opened that outer cover. A smaller sealed packet fell at his feet—its face was closely written over with these words—

"My son, your mother's hope is that this packet will never come into your hands during your guardian's life—that you will never leave your guardian's care, except to return to it again—that you will be as a son to him. If it should not be so, I implore you, I command you—it is a mother loving you above life who speaks—not to break this seal till John Masters Ireton is dead. Whatever

you believe of your mother—always believe that she loved you above herself—that it is not her own fame, but your peace and safety, she is studying now."

Wilfred read these words many times before he mastered their sense. He felt sick and stunned; even when he had read them many times, he continued to gaze at the closely-written lines blankly and stupidly. Motion near him, caused by the perching of a sparrow on a tall weed, drew off his gaze, and then it dwelt with the same absorbed vacancy on the rank grass.

A kind of rage woke within him when he roused from this stupor. Pacing up and down the cloister he muttered a hundred times—"Cruel caution! cruel caution! To be doomed to bear the burden on for years, perhaps for my whole life! Oh mother! yours was cruel caution."

The idea of hunting out his late guardian

and of trying to force the secret from him, crossed his mind only to be immediately abandoned—he knew any such attempt would be utterly futile. Lost in wild fancies and sombre imaginings, Wilfred forgot the flight of time; things past, present, and to come jostled each other in his disordered mind. By-and-by a benignant light dawned over this chaos—"She loved me—it is sweet to know surely how she loved me!" As he murmured this, tears came to his eyes, and soft consolation entered into his heart; but the light was transient, soon overclouded. Shuddering horror shut out consolation, as he thought—"The knowledge from which she tried so earnestly to shield me must be dreadful indeed!"

Three hours had past since Wilfred had entered the church, when the clanging to of a heavy door startled him to a sense of present engagements and responsibilities; but

just in time—one door into the church was already locked—in another minute, escape from the cloisters would have been impossible for that day.

Launched upon the noise and bustle of the street, Wilfred was jostled to and fro, and carried here and there, by eager passers-by; till, presently, an arm was linked in his, a voice in his ear cried,

"Found at last! Wake, dreamer! Come, double-quick, for heaven's sake! or we shall lose the last train that makes it possible to get home to-night."

"I am very sorry—I had forgotten," Wilfred began as he was hurried on.

"Forgotten! I have put the housekeeper at Ireton's in a pretty state by going there to ask for you. You must write to her to-morrow, for she looked as if she thought you might have drowned yourself."

"Did she?—ah!" And in spite of the hur-

ried pace at which he was led on, in spite of his companion's gay talk, Wilfred's imagination returned to the dread speculations of the last few hours.

CHAPTER III.

"Wie einst mit flehenden Verlangen
Pygmalion den Stein umschloss.

So schlang ich mich mit Liebes armen
Um die Natur, mit Jugendlust,
Bis sie zu athmen, zu erwarmen
Begann an meiner Dichter-brust."

"HERE we are! Throw your bag down to Roger. All well, Roger?—that's right."

Herbert Southern had jumped from the coach—had helped his friend down—their luggage had been taken off and piled on Roger's barrow—the coach had pursued its way and disappeared, before Wilfred com-

prehended that they had reached Beech Holmes, their destination.

There was no house in sight—only a picturesquely ruinous, ivy-clad lodge, standing close to entrance-gates, whose pillars were correspondingly ruinous and ivy-clad, which opened upon an avenue of gigantic beeches—the beeches being very ancient, having many unlopped dead limbs and half-severed wind-cracked branches, had something of the picturesquely ruinous look of the cottage and the pillars.

It was evident that no one was expected to appear from this lodge, for young Southern held the gates open while Roger wheeled the barrow through them; that accomplished, he turned to Wilfred.

"You have been quite lost the whole journey through, old fellow!—pray find yourself now, for they are all coming down the avenue to meet us."

Even now no house, not even the chimney of one, was to be seen; yet down the avenue, through the glancing evening sunbeams and the fantastic shadows, came a large family party.

A tall, black-robed lady, wearing a widow's mourning—young ladies in muslin dresses, with floating curls and waving ribbons—a youthful matron, her little children, her husband and husband's brother.

"The whole Southern force!" Herbert remarked—secretly wishing, as he remembered his friend's lonely estate, that he had given his mother some hint that would have secured a less demonstrative welcome.

"That we have been travelling through enchanted ground I know, by token of the instantaneous disappearance of the coach when we had done with it. It is plain that this, too, is fairy-land, and that this is a fairy-band approaching; there is no habita-

tion in sight, but, of course, the trunks of these magnificent trees open to receive their fairyships at will. Walk slower," Wilfred pleaded, "give me breathing-time, before you present me."

"Ah, Felicia! always the first to meet your old brother!—you know who is his favourite."

A child had separated from the group and come forward—a child with a small, exquisitely fair, pale face, framed heavily by masses of golden-threaded brown hair hanging on her shoulders. She submitted silently to her brother's hearty embrace; when he released her, she folded her tiny hands over one of his, and pressed her cheek against his coat-sleeve with a quiet fervour hardly childlike, looking up at him with eyes radiant with gladness, yet serene and calm.

The child loosened her clasp of her bro-

ther's hand after a few moments—relinquishing him to his mother, in whose arms he was clasped close with a fervent "welcome home, my son." Then his sisters, his brother-in-law, and his tiny nephews and nieces, all claimed their share of his notice.

Wilfred stood just a little apart—for a few moments quite forgotten; he started when a soft warm hand stole into his; looking down he met a clear, and, it seemed to him, compassionate gaze from the child Felicia's eyes. She smiled at him a timid smile, that went straight to his heart. As yet he had not heard her speak.

Young Southern, released from his sisters' embraces, tossed back his bright disordered locks, and looked round for his friend; he smiled significantly, seeing that Felicia had taken him under her protection.

It was now Wilfred's turn to receive a hearty and kindly welcome; but, as they

all ascended the avenue, he retained the little hand that had, unsolicited, crept into his. That avenue, illuminated by the low sunbeams, the trunks of the ancient trees turned to ruddy gold in the level light, struck Wilfred as marvellously beautiful. Mrs. Southern talked to her young guest of the loveliness of the country he had passed through—of the heat of the weather, and the length of the journey; while, as Wilfred noted, her glistening eyes, dwelt fondly on her tall son, who, walking before them surrounded by his sisters, often tossed back a glad look upon his mother.

The avenue, which was about half a mile in length, came to an end at the foot of a broad flight of steps, where a carriage-road branched off from it and curved round to the side of the house. A cedar of Lebanon, growing at the top of these steps, sweeping the balustrade with its branches,

did not yet allow the house to be seen. It was not till the steps had been ascended, and the wide-spreading cedar passed under, that it was visible. Surrounded by a broad stone terrace, which had to be gained by another flight of steps, the house looked rather insignificant, compared with the splendid avenue by which it was approached; but its appearance was at once picturesque and exquisitely homelike—the evening light brought out to the full the rich colours of the lichens and mosses which grew about its heavy porch and mullioned windows.

The whole party lingered a little while before entering the house. The terrace-pavement was imperfect and moss-grown; its broad-topped balustrade was chipped and broken, as were the ancient vases with which it was set; but the balustrade was luxuriantly overhung by blossoming creep-

ers, and the vases were well filled with drooping plants.

Perhaps Beech Holmes was the more beautiful — beautiful with rich-tinted, yet pathetic autumnal beauty—for the air of decay that breathed from its loveliness. Wilfred felt a poetry of contrast, as he gazed on the forms of human and youthful strength and beauty, and on the crumbling, weed-grown masonry that must have echoed to the feet and voices, and been touched and leant on by the hands and forms of many generations, long since passed away; he did not consciously moralize, but felt as if wrapped round by a dream-atmosphere stealing out from between the pages of some fair and ancient romance.

The terrace overlooked a wide extent of wood, vale, and water; beyond the water, line after line of mountainous hill rose up

and fell away, melting, to-night, into a dazzling, golden distance.

"You like it very much, don't you?" Felicia asked Wilfred, speaking for the first time since she had met Herbert. Her tone was low and confidential: Wilfred had to bend down to catch her words; he used a similar tone, answering:—

"I have never seen anything so perfectly beautiful—it is to me what your very brightest fairy-tales must be to you."

"But I do not like fairy-tales very much, because I cannot believe them."

Mrs. Southern's high, clear voice now made itself heard, summoning the young people to the tea-table. Turning to Wilfred she said:—

"I hope our noisy party will not quite bewilder you, Mr. Mason; you must be used to much more quiet than I can maintain amongst my riotous children."

"The life to which I have been used must, indeed, be different from your life here—as different as winter from summer, as the dullest prose from the fairest poetry."

"I only hope that the jingle of our poetry may not make you recoil towards the quiet of your prose," Mrs. Southern said, smiling indulgently at the young man's warmth of expression.

"Welcome to our home!" Herbert whispered in Mason's ear, putting his hand on his shoulder, as they passed through the low porch and entered a lofty, oak-raftered hall.

The whole party was soon seated at table, in a long room which ran the length of one wing of the house; one side and one end of this room retained the old-fashioned casements, set deep in the thick wall and admitting but little light—while, at the other end, modern plate-glass windows opened on

to the terrace, at the back of the house. From the terrace, on this side, as on the other, the ground sloped away; but here it fell more gradually—steps cut in the turf broke the descent at the steepest parts. This slope was sparingly dotted over with gaunt, much belichened fruit-trees, for the most part past bearing, the survivors of a once thickly-planted and productive orchard. Below the orchard ran a broad, shallow stream of sparkling brown water, across which was thrown a light bridge; from the stream the ground rose again, ascending, in broken lines, well-wooded to a considerable height, towards a mountain peak that showed gray and hoary in the distance.

The tea-table, with its brilliant silver, delicate china, piles of fruit, fragrant flowers, and ample provision of cool and pleasant dainties, all prettily adorned, gratified the hitherto not merely unsatisfied, but almost

undeveloped requirements of Wilfred's taste. His appointed place was between Felicia, who always sat next her mother, and Margaret Landon, the eldest and married daughter—the beautiful daughter *par excellence*. Some mirth was excited by the younger Mr. Landon's assertion of the positive necessity of his sitting beside Blanche, to assist her in pouring out the coffee, and by the doubtful results of this assistance. The tale told by Blanche's gentle confusion, and her happy blushes, made her pretty face almost as interesting to Wilfred's observant eyes as it was to John Landon's.

Wilfred found so much to observe in the faces, and to listen to in the conversation, round him, that he was disinclined to talk. His beautiful neighbour, interested in her brother's friend, gave herself some trouble in trying to draw him out. A student herself, she loved to talk of books, and by-

and-by both she and Wilfred were deaf to the light skirmish of merry talk kept up round the table, and deep in the beauties of an author who was a favourite with both.

Herbert greatly admired his eldest sister, and had been anxious that she should like his friend; he was delighted now to see their interest in each other—to see Wilfred's pale face light up, his eyes gleam as he listened, and kindle as he spoke. It is true, they talked only of books; but it is difficult to speak about the heart of beautiful books without showing something of the inmost feelings of one's own heart. Wilfred, who had never before talked with a young and beautiful-natured woman, felt some things Mrs. Landon said to be as revelations from an undreamed-of world—while others put into fit words thoughts and fancies of his own which he had deemed too sacred for expression, but which seemed to gather vivid life-likeness,

without losing anything of sacredness, when they were uttered by her lips and, still more touchingly, by her eyes.

Speaking of Wilfred to her husband, long after this evening, Margaret said:—

"Talking with Mr. Mason is like talking with a woman—I don't exactly know why; only, while he has far more intellectual power than any woman I know, he has a chivalrous patience with one's imperfect knowledge and imperfect speech which few women would have."

When the merry meal was over, and everybody had risen from the table, Wilfred said to Herbert:—

"Let me be alone a little while; everybody wants you, and I am quite bewildered. You cannot imagine how strange to me all here seems—it is like a fragment from some other state of being."

"Be one of us as soon as possible—that

is all we require of you," Herbert answered.

John and Blanche, lingering on the terrace in the dusk, saw Wilfred descend the slope, cross the stream, and vanish among the trees; but before he had left the close neighbourhood of the house he had seen a picture the beauty of which long haunted him. In a small room, lighted by one shaded lamp, the elder Mr. Landon was enjoying a good-night gambol with his children; stretched on the floor at his wife's feet, he submitted to various rough treatment from the two elder—a sturdy boy and girl—while the youngest, already in its tiny white night-dress, stood on its mother's lap, supported by her arm, leaning its head against her cheek, and surveying the proceedings with a calm, superior, pensive air. The light of the lamp fell full on Margaret; she watched the group at her feet with that peculiar smile, more of the eyes than of the lips, which some of the old

masters have given to their Madonnas—a smile the contemplation of which induces sadness, seeming, in its too utter sweetness, its perfect happiness, to contain a threat of bitterness and tears to come.

Though Wilfred turned quickly from contemplation of this scene, feeling as if such happiness were awful in its holiness, the memory of it often recurred to him in after years, when a face, not Margaret's, would wear the expression of Margaret's, and shine in the stead of Margaret's.

To-night he sped on, up the opposite hill, till he had cleared the wood; then he threw himself upon the ground, pressing his face down into the mossy turf—feeling that he threw himself lovingly upon the bosom of this lovely nature, embracing her with ardour.

When he lifted up his face, by-and-by, there was moisture on it, either of dew or of tears. He lay and watched the smoke from the

house-chimneys curling up against the clear, delicious glow of the sky—watched the lights kindling in one window after another—watched the late birds wheeling home—and watched for the rising of his last night's friend, the moon. Last night! Was it only last night he had stood upon the dreary bridge above the foul water? How long ago it seemed!

A strange mingling of rapture and agony rose and fell in Wilfred's breast: one moment it seemed to him that he had obtained a glimpse into the very heart of life's possible beauty and sweetness—only to be reminded, by the sealed packet in his bosom, that such beauty and sweetness were not among the possibilities of his life; the next his nature rebelled against this sentence of exclusion—a wild sense of undefined and unbounded power asserted itself—he sprang up, crying that his intense craving for

love and happiness, his hunger after them, should be to him a foreboding of the satisfaction of this hunger and craving.

He was proceeding to climb higher up the hill, when Southern's voice recalled him.

"Do you mean to spend the night out here? They have been asking for you. Felicia didn't want to go to bed without having said 'good night' to you."

The young men went towards the house together.

"Margaret is going to sing—I want you to hear her," Herbert remarked, as they drew near.

"Don't smother me with roses, or crush me with a shower of gold—I could not bear to hear your sister sing to-night. Pray make my excuses, and let me go to my room. I daresay you think me absurd; you don't know all I have endured to-

day, and you cannot guess all I shall have to endure for many a day."

"I want you to do what you like best; only I shall see you safe to your room. You are put into an out-of-the-way nook, for the sake of ensuring you the possibility of quiet."

After leading the way up several short flights of stairs, and along many passages, Southern pushed open a low-arched door of heavy oak. As he lighted the candles that stood ready on the table, he continued:—

"I hope I may trust you not to sit up —you look thoroughly tired out. Sleep well, and wake up one of us—your iron guardian and his gloomy house quite forgotten. I am afraid that your parting from the man of iron was none of the pleasantest. You must tell me about it to-morrow. Good night, my dear old fellow."

With the heartiest of hand-shakes, and the most beaming friendliness in his eyes, Herbert departed.

CHAPTER IV.

"Verweile doch! du bist so schön."

Wilfred was roused next morning by sounds strange to him — sounds of just-awakened birds and of lightly-stirred leaves; while through an open window the morning air came to him, laden with fragrance from flowers in the garden and heather on the hills.

The low, oak-raftered room in which he found himself had many casements, each offering a lovely picture of distant mountainous landscape, of slopes lying in pure

morning shadows, and summits gay in laughing light; the creepers clustering round the window-frames set these pictures charmingly.

The room was more like a library than a bed-room; its walls were clothed with old-fashioned, well-filled bookcases; the chairs and tables were of substantial oak; a good many bronze statuettes and busts, and several vases full of freshly-cut roses, adorned it.

It was a new thing for Wilfred to wake, as he did this morning, to a sense of physical and spiritual wellbeing—to a consciousness of the purity and beauty of the atmosphere he breathed, and with the expectation that the day would bring him none but good things, leaving him richer, happier, and better than it found him.

"I have made no compact with any Mephistopheles," he said—"I need not be afraid

to cry to this time, 'Verweile doch! du bist so schön'—I do cry it with my whole heart!"

He repeated the words in a clear, loud voice, and then murmured over to himself passage after passage from the old poets, in simple, betinzled, or worthily adorned praise of domestic and country life.

Afterwards he tried to recall everything that had occurred since he reached Beech Holmes — tried to recall every kind word that had been spoken to him, every peculiarly beautiful expression he had noticed on faces which all seemed to him, in various ways, lovely. The one sensation which he remembered with most especial pleasure was that he had experienced when the child Felicia's hand so unexpectedly and confidently stole into his own. As he indulged in this dreamy luxury of enjoyment, his own thoughts sprang from his brain—ready armed in words, the sound of which

pleased him. He was far too indolently happy to do more than murmur them over, as he had murmured his quotations before; but a hazy wonder rose in him and floated waveringly before his eyes—wonder whether he should ever have power to write words over which the eyes of beautiful women should grow tearful, at which the cheeks should flush and pale, as Margaret Landon's had done, while she repeated a short passage from a favourite poem.

A clear young voice singing far beneath at last drew Wilfred to the window. He could see Felicia's fair head glancing in and out among the rose-bushes, in a garden that looked very deep down; he made haste to go out, but did not find it very easy to discover that garden and the way into it.

He succeeded at last; and, having received her morning greeting, enquired

what her occupation was, and if he might be allowed to help her.

"I should very much like you to help me," she answered. "I want to cut off every one of the dead roses along this walk, and some are so high up that I cannot reach them. Will you take my scissors and my basket? I will run in and fetch another pair of scissors—the basket will do between us."

She was soon back and they both set to work—Wilfred stipulating that they should keep close enough together to talk as they worked. Sometimes the dead roses, and often showers of dew, fell upon Felicia's silky locks. Wilfred liked to see her shake these off—she did it with such patient and grave dignity; her whole manner was simple and sincere—there was no trace of childish coquetry about her. Once, when a long curl got entangled in a thorny branch,

Wilfred was obliged to go to the rescue. He touched the child's hair lovingly and reverently, and thought he had never felt anything so soft, or seen anything so pretty, as the tress that clung round his releasing fingers. Felicia was far too intent on her work to talk much, but what she did say seemed to her companion so gracefully quaint, so simply complete in matter and manner, that he mused over it and her wonderingly, marvelling if all little girls of Felicia's age were as charming as Felicia.

A voice from above the heads of the diligent gardeners interrupted his thoughts.

"Good morning, Mr. Mason—is it not a lovely morning? Felicia, child, you have been out too long—you will be tired before the day is begun."

The fellow-labourers looked up. Mrs. Southern and Mrs. Landon were leaning over the terrace-balustrade, looking down upon

them. Mrs. Southern's careworn and sunburnt face, expressive chiefly of cheerful patience, and the delicate beauty of Margaret—whose eyes, Wilfred thought, as he glanced up, lighted her pale face with tenderly-veiled splendour, as stars light the sky on a clear and yet dewy summer night—were in strong contrast, and yet were brought into harmony by a look of heart-goodness common to them both.

"Good morning, dear mamma—good morning, sister Margaret!" cried Felicia. "We must go in to breakfast now," she added to Wilfred, putting her hand into his. As they mounted the many steps to the terrace she asked confidentially:—

"Do you think the angels are much more beautiful than my sister Margaret?"

After a momentary pause—a look, first at Mrs. Landon, standing above them, the sun shining upon her morning-dress of spotless

white, then into the questioning face of the fair child, Wilfred answered:—

"I do not suppose we should feel the beauty of the angels as we feel the beauty of some human faces; they would not be more beautiful for us, perhaps, because we should not understand their beauty—they are too far from us."

"But are they very far from us?"

"Not from all of us—('Heaven lies about us in our infancy,' indeed). I only meant they are too different from most of us, for their beauty to touch us as human beauty does."

By this time all the family, "except that lazy Herbert," had assembled on the terrace; and even as his mother was abusing his idleness he too appeared.

Many plans for active enjoyment of the day were discussed during breakfast; but they were all rejected on account of the great

heat of the weather. Some one, however, by-and-by proposed a quiet day, and then a row up the lake late in the afternoon, tea on one of the islands, and return by moonlight. This scheme met with general approbation.

After breakfast the family loitered in the cool hall and porch awhile, then dropped off one by one, or two by two. Mrs. Southern carried off her son, John Landon followed Blanche into the garden, Mary went about the business of the house, Felicia ascended to the nursery to amuse the children while nurse was busy, Mrs. Landon took her work out-doors, Wilfred carrying her chair for her and placing it under the cedar; Mr. Landon, settled at his wife's feet, began to work intently at a boat he was making for his boy. Husband and wife both invited Wilfred to remain with them; but he had made up his mind for a long ramble,

in spite of the heat. Pursuing the same path he had taken yesterday, he soon climbed high enough to get the benefit of a fresh breeze; he had intended to gain the distant rocky peak, but it seemed to recede as he advanced—and before long he was glad to throw himself down beneath the shadow of a gray boulder and of an ash which grew out of it.

The brightness of his morning-mood was already dimmed:—

> "So sind am härtsten wir gequält:
> Im Reichthum fühlend was uns fehlt."

Beauty, lavishly displayed, oppressed and stupefied him; the desire of possession, desire that this beauty should fully enter into his being, arose to torment him by its futility, to make him conscious of darkness of soul and heaviness of spirit.

The music of a little rivulet leaping from the rock close beside him, set itself to wea-

rily monotonous and melancholy words—clear and bright as the little stream looked, for him it would utter no others.

"Found at last!" cried Southern's cheery voice, as he dropped down from the ash-tree, alighting close to Mason.

"What a hunt I have had, and how hot I have made myself! How could you climb so high?"

> "'Step by step, stone by stone,
> Strain by strain, groan by groan,
> The goal is gained, our powers are done,
> As loss we count that we have won;
> Life's pleasant plains are out of sight,
> Before us frowns a higher height.'"

"Which means that you think it was pleasanter below? This is not bad, however."

Herbert, stretching himself on the moss, looked up towards the overhanging ash with an expression of perfect content, which did not the least change as he said:—

"My mother has sternly kept me to the point all this time—the point having been the contemplation of an anything but satisfactory state of money-matters. My mother is a capital woman of business, and there's need she should be!"

After a brief pause, he continued:—

"A few of the thousands my father was swindled out of by a nameless rascal—nameless to me at least—would come by no means amiss to us now. I do not think I am very covetous or vindictive, but I am sometimes inclined to pour powerful anathemas on that scoundrel's head. Heigho! I wish I could find a royal road to fortune! But, enough of my affairs. Will you be pleased to lift up a corner of the impenetrable veil that covers yours, and let me peep in and see something of your schemes for the future? Not if you do not wish," he added quickly, as, rising

on his elbow to look at Wilfred, he noticed that he coloured at the question and appeared to hesitate to answer it.

"You see, my position is so different from yours," Wilfred began apologetically —"I am alone; whether I sink or swim does not much matter. I mean to try whether my brains and my pen will earn me bread enough to keep me from starving."

The wise Herbert looked grave.

"Did your guardian, such a practical man, and, I should have thought, a very obstinate man, consent to this? Did he leave you free?"

"He left me quite free." Wilfred slightly smiled as he answered; he had reasons, and not bad ones, for preferring that Southern should remain ignorant of the exact nature of his freedom; he knew the impulsive generosity and unwearying

kindness of his friend's nature—knew how instantaneous would be the desire and how dogged the determination "to do something for Wilfred," should he have reason to think that Wilfred was friendless and almost without resources. Having resolved to go his own way unhelped and unheeded, Mason did not wish to have to battle against Herbert's resolution to aid and befriend him.

"Quite free!" Herbert echoed, thoughtfully.

"As I said before, I am alone—one by myself—my wants will be few—it will be a hard case if I cannot earn enough to live upon."

"You lay much stress on your being alone—one by yourself—but do you expect to live alone always?"

Wilfred smiled slightly, fixing his soft eyes full on his friend.

"There is no provoking cause to make

me look so far forward," he said. As he added, "It is hardly likely, hardly possible, that I shall ever marry," all the light died out of his face.

It was Southern's turn to colour—he did so vividly, as he answered :—

"I won't pretend not to know what you mean; but I understand my position better now than I did when I indulged in those boyish fancies. I must think of nothing but work for many years to come. To return to your scheme: if you need a bread-winning profession—is it good to take up authorship in that way? Is not the time for living only to write books past? I cannot help thinking that you would be happier leading a more active life. I do believe that no life is so happy as that in which each day necessitates the doing of a day's work — external, compulsory work."

As Wilfred maintained silence, Southern remarked:—

"You don't deign me an answer; perhaps I seem to you to be arrogantly talking of what I don't understand?"

"I was thinking—what you say about living only to write books has no meaning for me. I don't think that any one should live for any outward result of work—living should be life's work. A man's aim (an author's especially) should be, what Goethe said his was, to improve himself, to sharpen his own faculties, to raise the standard of his own personality, and then to express only that which he recognized as good and true. What a man has produced should be merely the necessary result of what he was, before he pressed on to a higher stage, and only useful to others who have not reached that stage. If a man must consciously live for an object, let him find it within

himself—let it be his own culture and development towards perfection." Here Wilfred broke off with a laugh of self-scorn that did not say much for his belief in what he was somewhat dogmatically laying down as truth.

"I was going to say, 'so much for your study of the great German'; but I see you do not feel that what you say is true, or sufficient—what little belief you have in it you will lose in a few years. If a man's heart is in the right place, and especially if it is as gentle and single as yours is, such a theory as that of one's own development being a sufficient object to live for, will never be believed in practically. Yours is the last temperament to have any rest amid such dry bones; you have a real hunger and thirst (repress it as you may) after human sympathy. God's purpose in our lives may be our development towards

perfection; but I think we are presumptuous if we fancy that by consciously setting ourselves to grow great and perfect, constantly watching our own progress, we shall forward His end; it seems to me that those who act in that way act like children who continually dig up their plants to see what growth their roots have made."

"But, recognizing God's purpose in our lives, ought we not to make it ours?"

"It seems to me that we cannot recognize God's purpose. His ways are not as our ways—they are wonderful and past our finding out. I merely said such *might* be God's purpose."

"What would you lay down to be the safe and right aim of all lives? Is not the Saint-Simonian theory, that a man should work for the happiness of others as a necessary condition of his own happiness, to the full as selfish in reality, though it

may not sound so, as Goethe's theory that each man should make his own fortune first, from which the happiness of others must follow?"

"Suppose we say that a man should live towards God, keeping His perfection before the eyes of his soul, that he should live for his neighbours, keeping his heart open to the needs and sufferings of his kind, mightn't we hope that such a man's nature would both broaden and deepen continually?"

"As yours does, and always will!" Mason exclaimed warmly; "my mind's eye shows me a beautiful picture of what your life will be: you will be a true physician, for soul and body—healing the body consciously, you will unconsciously heal souls."

"God grant your words may to some extent come true! I know, Wilfred, that higher considerations than you choose to own have influenced your decision—if de-

cision it is—just as lower ones than you give me credit for influenced mine. Though I should like to grow rich, I do not expect to be absorbed in the pursuit of fortune, or to care for it for its own sake; and though you may desire to grow famous, you will not give yourself up to the pursuit of fame, or——."

"Fame! the pursuit of fame!—if I were to set myself to pursue anything, it would be, not fame, but happiness. I do not care to be famous, but to be happy I have the most intense longing."

"To pursue happiness would be a great mistake, you know; when you fancy she is within reach, and open your arms to embrace her, the 'red mouse' will jump out of her mouth—the story of Sir Gawaine and the loathsome lady will be reversed."

"You are cruel."

"Not at all—though you may not by seeking happiness find her, she will, God grant, find you. Now, let us speculate no further—I quite agree with Mephistopheles on this head,* and it is time we returned to the world again."

"How very beautiful your sister, Mrs. Landon, is!" Wilfred remarked, apparently *àpropos* of nothing—as he got up, with evident reluctance, and they began to descend the hill-side. "She reminds me, in expression, of an engraving I have seen of Dante's Beatrice, from a picture of Ary Scheffer's."

"I felt sure you would admire her—Landon, too, is a thoroughly nice fellow when you come to know him. I hope you will see a good deal of them if you go

* "Mat ein Kerl, der speculirt
Ist wie ein Thier, auf dürre Heide,
Von einem bosen Geist im Kreis herum geführt,
Und rings umher liegt schöne grüne Weide."

to London, as you talked of doing. I suppose you do not mean to live quite 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot.' I am sure you will need looking after. My mother says you are ruining your constitution by studying at night; she is certain, judging you by your appearance, that you make a habit of sitting up late—this will be inexcusable when you live alone, and can choose your own hours. I hope you believe that power of mind soon decays where there is no physical power to back it."

"You are quite oppressively wise to-day, Southern!" Wilfred exclaimed. "If I were to say that I do not set a very high value on strength of body and length of years, you would of course be shocked; you do not know anything of the soul-sickness which makes one cry against the burden of being, and desire death rather than life."

"I do know that only the exaggerations of a morbid and diseased imagination can make any burdens laid upon us really unendurable; and that what you call soul-sickness is often only a consequence of physical weakness or disease. I do not fancy that you have been the perpetrator of any mysterious crime, and so have brought upon yourself a weight of mysterious, life-long remorse; therefore I should hope that, beyond the burdens borne by all flesh, no burdens are laid upon you but such as you may and should shake yourself free from."

After those words of Southern's nothing passed between them as they went through the intense wavering heat, till, pausing a moment on the shady bridge, Herbert offered his hand to Wilfred—it was grasped cordially.

"None but our own deeds shall affect

our friendship," Southern said; "and I trust that those deeds will only tend to strengthen it."

CHAPTER V.

"Only a child—
Heaven's light yet ling'ring, lost amid her hair,
Shining serenely forth from mild eyes fair;
Taking my Fate into her hand she smiled—
That smile was a meek woman's, glad and sad,
Sad from sweet sympathy, to serve me glad."

LATE that night Wilfred entered his room, and, dropping into a chair, yielded himself up to dreamy meditation.

He recalled the scenes, sounds, and sensations of the evening—the fairy island on the enchanted lake, in which were mirrored the delectable mountains; the water-lilies, tinged with fire by the sunset and then

blanched again by the moon-beams; Margaret Landon's Beatrice-like face uplifted to the light as she sang; other happy and lovely faces; sweet songs, sweet silences, and clear ringing laughter; the measured splashing of the oars and the dancing fall of sparkling showers of foam pearls. These things and many more mingled confusedly. Distinct from all of them he recalled the feeling that had stolen over him when a tired child's head had drooped upon his shoulder and rested there, when his arm had encircled a slight, soft form. Holding Felicia thus, Wilfred had trembled with positive happiness, for he knew that this child loved him.

The events of the day had excited Wilfred—sleep did not seem a possibility. As he opened his note-book, wishing to write some few lines that might in years to come recall this time, the inevitable packet fell

from it. Immediately the current of his thoughts was changed and chilled. His eyes took a fiercely hungry look as they remained fixed on the letter. To-night he was not patient, or submissive.

"Intolerable!" he murmured. "Where-ever I go, whatever I do, am I to be haunted and taunted by my ignorance of a mystery which only this shred of paper, this blotch of wax, holds from me. What if I dare the worst and at once tear out the heart of this hateful secret? Tear out its heart!"

He echoed his own words shudderingly, and rose from the table; it seemed to his excited fancy as if he had spoken of tearing out his mother's heart. As he walked up and down the room he cried—"Mother! mother! release me from this intolerable restraint. A curse is on me, turning to my torment what you did in love! Appear to

me, or by some dream or sign release me!"

Again he gazed at the innocent-looking packet lying on his table—again and again he reperused the faded writing of those (as he called them) fatal lines.

By a train of sophistries, by passionate exaggeration of the misery of ignorance and the evil influence of vague dread, he might, perhaps, have brought himself to disregard alike his mother's entreaty and her command, had not a slight sound startled him from this commune with a familiar demon. He listened; some one knocked softly at his door. Looking at his watch, Wilfred found that it was nearly two o'clock; the knock was repeated a third time, and then, full of vague and ghostly expectation, he threw the door open wide.

The child Felicia, covered from head to foot with a white shawl, stood outside; her

hair, which had been uncurled by the night dew, drooped heavily on her shoulders—her little feet shone bare and white on the dark boards; she was very pale, and the eyes she lifted to Wilfred's wondering face were full of timid solicitude.

He did not speak directly, and, unlike a child, she waited to be questioned; so there was a momentary silence.

"Is anything the matter, Felicia? How is it you are not asleep? You were so tired," Wilfred said.

"I could not sleep. I felt very unhappy about you."

"About me—you dear child?"

"Mamma said the other day that you would kill yourself by studying at night; from my window I can see the light in yours. I know it is hours and hours since we came home, so I thought about your killing yourself, and I thought that perhaps

if I asked you you would go to bed." She raised eyes full of soft appeal to his.

"You kind little thing!" Wilfred exclaimed. "The light shall be put out before you can get back to your room, and I will behave better now that I know that a kind little friend watches me."

"Thank you, Mr. Mason." She had bidden him good night, and was closing the door behind her, when a sudden impulse made Wilfred recall her.

"Will you come back for a moment, Felicia? I will not keep you long."

She complied, with gentle wonder in her face. He set a chair for her, and wrapped his coat round her bare feet; then, taking up the packet, he said:—

"I am afraid of being tempted to do what would be wrong, Felicia, and you could prevent me—will you?"

"Oh, yes! if you will tell me how."

"My mother, who died when I was very young, left this letter for me, but I may not open it till another person is dead. Now, I would cut off my right arm to know what this letter tells me, and I am afraid of being tempted to open it before I ought. I want you, Felicia, to keep the letter and save me from temptation."

Wilfred's colour rose and deepened as the child's clear eyes perused his face, while she seemed to hesitate.

"Perhaps you think me cowardly, unmanly—think I ought to trust myself, and to overcome instead of escaping from temptation?" Unconsciously, he no longer spoke as if to a child.

"We pray not to be led into temptation."

"We do, dear; you will keep me out of it?—you will take my letter and save me from this danger?—you will be my little guardian angel?"

"If mamma does not mind, I will take care of it," she said, and let him close her fingers over it.

"You are my conscience now, dear. (A pure and fair conscience I have!) May I kiss your hand upon our compact?"

The child held up her pale little face to his, but he stooped lower and kissed her hand, the hand that held the letter. She took the kiss sedately, then, looking at him with a face from which shone a woman's sympathy and a child's simplicity, she asked,

"Are you always sad? Is it because your mother is dead, and you have no brothers and sisters?" Tears began to drop from the serene eyes.

Again kissing her hand, Wilfred said,

"You must not cry for me, my darling." His heart was startled by the sound of that word of endearment which his lips had probably never spoken before. "I shall be happier

now that my fate is in this kind little hand," he added.

Holding the letter firmly, Felicia slipped down from her chair.

"Those poor little bare feet!" Wilfred looked despairingly at his own boots and slippers as he spoke, then added,

"You must let me carry you back again —may I?"

"If you please, if I am not too heavy. I wasn't frightened coming; but I think I might be going back," she said. He lifted her up in his arms, and she clasped her hands round his neck confidingly.

Her room was a long way off, in an opposite corner of the house; as he set her down at the door she pointed out, she thanked him in a cautiously subdued voice. Having seen the door closed behind her, he returned to his room with a happy hushed feeling at his heart, "as if he had been

visited by an angel," he told himself. His first act was to put out the light—his next to kneel and pray.

"I may keep it—it is locked up in a box of mine, and the box is put in my own desk, which mamma takes care of till I am older."

Felicia told Wilfred this, directly she met him next morning; afterwards she did not allude to the matter. No one but Mrs. Southern, Wilfred, and the child knew of the incident of that summer night till long afterwards.

Felicia seemed languid, and looked paler than her wont all the next day. Wilfred watched her and waited on her with a chivalrous tenderness of devotion that brought a smile to the lips, and tears to the eyes of the observant Margaret.

CHAPTER VI.

"O Menschenherz, was ist dein Glück?
Ein räthselhaft geborner,
Und, kaum gegrüsst, verlorner,
Unwiederholter Angenblick?"

VARIED by all manner of excursions, by land, water, hill, and valley, the weeks of summer and holiday flew swiftly. Wilfred became a universal favourite; he was no longer the melancholy boy, seeming half-shy, half-proud, to whom Southern had first been attracted more by compassion than liking. His nature had developed rapidly in the sunshine of a congenial atmosphere; as he

became more and more gay and unconstrained, it seemed to bud with fresh charms and graces each day. Wilfred was not naturally shy; but being at once intensely observant, and very ill at ease, while—ignorant of the characters, tastes, and sympathies of those around him—the air he breathed was, as it were, foreign to his nature, he was apt to become wholly absorbed in watching others, and to forget that he, too, had a part to play. It was not, therefore, till he had been some time among the Southerns that his part was played with ease and grace.

Holiday life at Beech Holmes was utterly different from any life he had ever known or dreamed of. He had hardly opened a book during his stay there; his idleness had been complete, and he was inclined to think culpable; yet at no period had his mental growth been so rapid—his whole nature had

been richly nourished by the contemplation of forms of animate and inanimate beauty at once more real and more spiritual than those with which his imagination had teemed. These months were, perhaps, the most of all valuable to him, in that they freed him from the thraldom of a habit of incessant and purposeless study, taught him the possibility of living without books, and plunged him completely into so pure a "vagabondism of sensation."

A lovely evening, coming after some days of wild, prematurely autumnal weather, was the last Wilfred was to spend at Beech Holmes. A shade of melancholy tinged the mood of almost all the party. Other departures were impending; the holiday summer life was drawing to an end.

"When moonlight stole o'er the tints of eve," everybody assembled on the terrace; wonderful quiet reigned as they watched the

moon resting upon, and then slowly lifting herself up from, the heavy, dusky branches of the cedar.

John Landon was at Beech Holmes again; he, too, planned to leave it to-morrow; but the air—timid, assured, proud, and bashful—with which Blanche Southern hung upon his arm, indicated that their parting would not be a long one.

Mrs. Southern was the centre of this terrace group. Felicia, while she leant her cheek against her mother, let Wilfred's hand clasp hers; perhaps she, the youngest, was the saddest of the party — she looked as sad as the serenity of her lovely eyes would let her. She, better than anyone else, knew how Wilfred's heart ached at the thought of to-morrow's parting, and how desolate and lonely a life that parting would begin for him. She bore her grief and his, for she pitied him with that pity of love which

makes the grief of the one loved one's own grief.

When they went indoors Mrs. Southern begged Wilfred to come with her for a few moments to her den, as she called a little room which had been the steward's room in the long-past days of Beech Holmes grandeur.

After kind enquiries into his plans and motherly cautions concerning his health, Mrs. Southern asked if he seriously and earnestly desired that the packet he had confided to her little daughter should continue in the child's keeping.

"I have felt happier ever since it passed into her hands—pray let her keep it," was his eager answer.

"It is safe with her. We call her, dear child, Faith, Hope, Charity, and Constancy, by turns — and do not know which name suits her best. It is quite safe with her;

but yet I would rather that the letter were in your own hands."

Wilfred's eyes shone on the mother as she spoke thus of her child; but he did not strive to say a word in Felicia's praise—to him the child seemed to stand above all praise; he only said:—

"Pray let Felicia keep it."

"For the present, then. I shall hope that you will soon come and see us again, and that you may then feel inclined to relieve her of her charge. But suppose by any mischance that we should lose sight of each other—you may leave England, or we may be obliged to leave Beech Holmes——."

"The letter is not to be opened while Mr. Ireton, my late guardian, lives: he is not an old man, and is, I should think, a very strong one. The time for opening the letter may never come; if I die and have

not claimed it, I suppose it had better be burnt unread."

"I do not know if I have ever told you that your guardian is not quite a stranger to me; many years ago—more than twenty—my husband had a great deal of business intercourse with him. I used to hear his name constantly. I saw him once or twice."

"You know him!—you knew him many years ago?" The old expression of wild and painful eagerness distorted Wilfred's face. Controlling himself by a great effort, he asked:—

"Do you know anything of his past life? Anything of his former friends or enemies?"

"Very little. When he was a comparatively young man, and had just succeeded to his father's business, he took into his employ the son of an old friend, placing

him in a confidential position. I do not know anything of details; but the young man turned out very badly—he ruined your guardian, and others were involved with him. Mr. Ireton was a proud man—proud, above all, of an inherited, unspotted business reputation; this did not escape. He had some motive for wishing, as far as possible, to screen the real transgressor. Malice suggested an evil motive — scandal was, I believe, busy with every incident of his life. I know that my husband considered his personal probity as unsullied, but he could not induce others to share his conviction. Mr Ireton must have led a life of unflinching toil to have recovered his position, so far as he has done. I never knew much of him; my husband was in weak health for many years previous to his death, and led a very quiet retired life; it must have been more than

twenty years since I had heard your guardian's name when I heard it from Herbert, in connection with you."

"Do you by any chance remember what scandal said about my guardian's reasons for wishing to screen his enemy? Some little truth, or some clue to the truth, might be sifted out from among falsehoods. Do you remember his enemy's name? Was any woman's name mixed up in the matter?"

"I do not suppose I ever knew—I do not even remember hearing the culprit's name; whether any woman's name was mixed up in the matter I have no idea. I had many young children to nurse and tend, and little time or interest to spare. My husband knew everything; but he burnt all the papers and letters that touched on affairs of that period—at Mr. Ireton's express wish, I imagine."

"Truly, I suffer a Tantalus torture!—the knowledge I desire perpetually evades my reach by a hair's breadth only—shall I never grasp it?"

Wilfred spoke with passionate impatience; and then, bending his head down upon the hands that had been clenched in eager expectation, groaned aloud.

For a few minutes Mrs. Southern regarded him with silent pity; then, laying her hand upon his shoulder, she said:—

"Dear Wilfred, will you take plain speaking as a sign of affection?"

He raised his head, but, even as he begged her to speak plainly, it was easy to see that he shrank from her, as if expecting to be wounded.

"I always think," Mrs. Southern began gently, "that a man, whose position or circumstances naturally excite pity, should be peculiarly careful that his character and

conduct shall command respect. A man whose position and whose character alike call for our pity, is in danger of receiving it mixed with contempt—is in danger of being despised. If there is anything in your circumstances for which you are to be commiserated, it seems to me that it is the more needful that by force of will you should overcome any inclination to self-pity, and, by showing self-respect, should make others respect you. Leave the past alone, dear boy, and occupy yourself with the present—with the correction of your faults. You have so many qualities which can and will elicit admiration, that it appears to me to be of the greatest importance that you should cultivate others of which nature or education has left you deficient. A young man whose gifts cause him to be sought after and flattered, and who is deficient in self-respecting self-restraint, in

steadfastness of purpose, and in power of will, is peculiarly exposed to many and dangerous temptations—apt to be a plaything in some hands, and an instrument of evil in others. I hope you will feel, Wilfred, that it is because I have something of a mother's love for you that I presume to lecture you."

Mrs. Southern held out her hand as she finished speaking. Wilfred grasped it with a grateful look, but, as he did so, said despondingly:—

"It seems as if everyone I know had leagued together to exhort me to use what I do not possess—to be strong where it is my nature to be weak."

"But the only source of true strength is open and common to all."

"That may be, but all have not the needful vessel for drawing the waters."

"That indeed have they, as they find when the time of real thirst comes."

"Mother!" exclaimed Herbert, entering and dragging Felicia after him, "when are you going to release Wilfred? A lady is anxious for the setting free of her knight."

"You are jealous Herbert, I see—and you put your own jealous impatience upon your little sister's shoulders; however, I won't detain dear Wilfred any longer."

So saying, Mrs. Southern rose and led the way into the drawing-room.

The terrace commanded, for a considerable distance, the road by which the coach for Silverthorpe must come; here they all assembled next morning, and as they watched for its appearance everybody seemed to strive who could say the kindest things to the departing guest.

Mr. and Mrs. Landon pressed for a promise that he would often visit them in

town, to which they meant to return very soon — Mr. Landon's present business at Beech Holmes being to fetch his wife and children home.

"The children will be so glad to see you; and papas and mammas always make those welcome whom the children love—eh! mamma?" Mr. Landon turned to Mrs. Southern, after glancing at John and Blanche.

"Even when they have learnt that the welcome will be repaid by theft. Such is our fate, Margaret—you will be overtaken by the doom some day; your Lily is a coquette by birth, and very precocious. As for me, I shall be left alone in time."

"Indeed, mamma, I will never leave you—I will not indeed, mamma," the child Felicia said, clinging round her.

"You will be last to leave me, no doubt."

"I will never leave you—never, never!

Don't say I will—you hurt me; I will always stay with you, mamma."

The childish face was full of serious purpose, and the eyes brimful of tears.

Mrs. Southern stroked the fair young head soothingly, but her smile, though tender, was incredulous.

Felicia felt it to be so. She looked up at Wilfred with a pained, pleading look, as if to ask that he, at least, would believe in her constancy. He stooped and whispered something in her ear which made her brighten up a little.

The coach came in sight, and they all trooped down the avenue. Perhaps the great Beeches there, being so old, that the sap circulated in them feebly and imperfectly, were an easy prey to the early frosts, and unable to bear the boisterousness of the autumn wind; for already the wide road beneath them was strewn

with crisp, yellow leaves and broken twigs; while many decayed branches, which had been concealed by the luxuriant foliage of more vigorous neighbours, now stretched themselves forth, bare and gaunt, serving as death's-head at the royal festival of gorgeous autumnal pomp of colouring.

"Try and think of this place as a home, as long as we remain here, and of me as almost a mother," were Mrs. Southern's final words to Wilfred.

At the last moment Felicia placed a small bunch of autumn violets in her friend's hand. She said "good-by," quietly, quietly lifting up her mouth for his farewell kiss; but when the coach was out of sight she turned her face from the light, hid it in her mother's gown, and kept it hidden a long time.

Herbert went a stage with his friend. Both the young men were silent for a good

while. Wilfred looked back till the top of the tallest chimney, and then the hill which sheltered Beech Holmes, had disappeared.

"That is over!" he said then, drawing a long breath.

"What an exclamation!"

"It is like waking from a delicious dream; even when I said 'good-by' I did not believe I was really going."

"You must soon be there again; with or without me you will always be welcome."

"I do not feel as if there were a possibility of anything in my life being like this visit—which is over. I suppose I have been happy; but I don't know much about it. The 'me' I have been conscious of at Beech Holmes is unlike any 'me' I have known before. Consciousness of individuality is a strange and perplexing mystery."

"Spare me!" Herbert said, laughing.

"Do not laugh, Southern, I cannot to-

day. I feel that I am about to resume a burden that will press more grievously than ever. If I could only see in the far distance some certain time when I might throw off this burden—when there would be a probability, even a possibility, for me of such happiness as my heart craves hungrily, I could bear on cheerfully; but the future looks such a dismal blank. Life looks so wearily long, so unbrokenly dreary!"

"Work, work, work! Work is the one unfailing panacea for human ills. Don't look forward with craving — let good fortune take you by surprise!"

"I think a man in your position can hardly realize what my position is. I want something external to myself to live for—in spite of what I tried to make you believe that I believed, some months ago. Vague philanthropic cant about living for

one's kind, one's age and generation, won't satisfy me. I do not believe that one can live for one's kind, except by living for individuals."

"Right womanishly felt and spoken, Miss Mason!" Herbert exclaimed; then he added quickly—"I believe I should never have taken to you as I did, but for that something womanish which I often feel in you. I have always been used to womankind, and you seemed a nearer approach to a woman than anyone else near me."

"Mr. Ireton called me womanly—womanish, he meant it for a severe reproach. I felt it to be so—do you, too, mean a reproach when you call me womanish?"

Herbert did not answer immediately. "I certainly did not then mean the word as a term of reproach," he said, after a pause; "but I stopped to consider if I had unconsciously implied a reproach. It seems

to me that to call a man womanish may be to confer the highest praise, or the most severe censure. I fancy your womanishness is of a mixed nature; but I don't feel any 'call' to preach to you. Time will show what stuff you are made of—at Beech Holmes, at all events, you will always have judges more sympathetic than critical—for Felicia, you are already a hero of romance."

"The friendship of your family will be my greatest stimulus and safeguard; the name they know me by will, I hope, win some honour. I must try and forget that it is not my name—that some day I may have to give it up, to take a sullied and disgraced name in its stead."

"To make that, too, in time an honoured name! Would not that be doing something noble, something worth doing?"

"It would be too much for me to do; I am afraid the disgraced name might

crush me down beneath it, instead of being raised and purified by me."

"It would not—it ought not—it must not; one day you will be both good and great—you will justify our love. Accept that as my parting prophecy—you will not grow weak and miserable, but good and great."

CHAPTER VII.

"Ich weiss das mir nichts angehört;
Aus der Gedanke, der ungestört
Aus meiner Seele will fliesen
Und jeder günstige Augenblick,
Den mich ein liebendes Geschick
Von Grund aus lässt geniessen."

AFTER the country freshness and refined elegance of everything at Beech Holmes the stifling atmosphere and mean ugliness of a cheap London lodging seemed dreadful to Wilfred, almost intolerable. Walking up and down his two rooms, late on the night of his arrival, he asked himself—

"What vague, wild, absurd superstition

could have brought me to this crowded wilderness?"

Thoroughly harassed and heart-sick, irritated almost beyond endurance by the ceaseless roar and rattle in the street beneath, the only sedative he could discover was the determination to rise early next day, and either seek another lodging, or altogether fly from London.

That, instead of doing either, he occupied those two dingy rooms for very many months was doubly characteristic—characteristic of his easily changed resolution; characteristic, too, in the cause of the change.

He rang for his landlady next morning, intending to tell her that he should not remain with her.

The night before he had only seen a slatternly servant; when the mistress came, she was not much less slatternly—but she was a mild-eyed, soft-voiced, dejected-looking

woman, and clinging shyly to her apron was a fair-haired child, in whom Wilfred found, or fancied, some likeness to Felicia. This fancied likeness, together with the mother's gentle dejection, vanquished him—he signified a wish for breakfast, expressed himself politely about the accommodation, made some overtures of friendship to little Jane, and did not say one word about changing his quarters.

When he had received and arranged his books and pictures his rooms looked habitable; by degrees he ceased to notice the dingy tastelessness which had, at first, so much shocked him. Becoming a favourite of little Jane's, Wilfred was favoured by her mother. Jane was often allowed to answer his bell. Always receiving a kind and gentle welcome to his room she was not ungrateful; when she went with her mother to the green-grocer's, or to the market, she sometimes begged, sometimes bought, a few flowers

—these she always arranged in a glass of water and placed on Wilfred's table.

As upon a new world Wilfred launched himself upon the London streets; he felt a pleasing excitement in taking his solitary and meditative way, unknown and unnoticed, among myriads of his fellow-creatures—nursing the while an undefined, half-sad, half-triumphant consciousness of the possession of powers that might one day claim for him the sympathy and admiration of thousands. While the novelty lasted, the greater part of his time was spent in the streets; having, by over-use, worn out this pleasure, he shut himself into his room and strove to continue a course of study which the visit to Beech Holmes had broken off.

At this time Wilfred's scheme was to earn the small sum on which he thought he could subsist by giving clas-

sical lessons in any two or three families to which he could obtain introductions—postponing, for a few years, the gratification of other and more ambitious hopes. It was with dismay that he found the concentration of mind necessary for study become difficult, if not impossible—that he found himself continually falling into reveries, dwelling intently upon the most trivial details of the last few months. Sometimes an hour would pass while his fingers lingered between the same pages of a Lexicon, and his eyes and thoughts were alike withdrawn from it. Rousing himself from these day-dreamings he was conscious of the intense craving, both of heart and brain, for that beauty and poetry of life of which his present seemed barren; conscious also of infinite and indefinite effort, that was not wholly painful, to seize and hold the fleeting phantoms of imagination.

The evenings of such idle days brought remorse for wasted hours, despair at the lost mastery of mind. He knew that the distractions which made waste of his life came from within, not from without, for he was accustomed to the noise of the street now, and did not even hear it. The young student generally enjoys a glorious independence, through his power of absorption and abstraction; it is not till over-work has made the brain irritable, or forced work has made it unhealthy, that outward things tyrannize over it.

Wilfred stood by the window one evening, pondering—asking himself what was to be done to lay the disconnected thoughts and fancies which grew and multiplied; which, while they made former pursuits laborious and distasteful, appeared too airy and too fragmentary to be captured and formed into a palpable whole!

The room was already dusky, when a little white face appeared at the door.

"May I stand at your window and see the lamp-lighter go down the street?" was Jane's request.

"Yes, come in, dear."

Jane watched, standing on a chair with Wilfred's arm round her, till all the lamps in sight were kindled and the light of the one opposite shone into the room; then she turned to Wilfred with the question:—

"Who lights up all the stars?"

The child was a very ignorant child, as Wilfred found when he tried to explain scientifically how the stars were lighted up. The idea of giving her some simple and regular instruction crossed his mind—the time came when he reproached himself with not having done so.

"God lights them up, doesn't he?" Jane

asked, at the end of his little lecture, to which she had listened patiently.

He thought that there was beauty in the obstinate simplicity of this remark—told himself that a child's instinct was more sure than a man's knowledge—and dismissed the thought of teaching this child. If Jane had shown him the picture in her mind, of God as a lamp-lighter, gigantic, and with a gigantic ladder, he might have doubted the beauty of even a gentle child's ignorance, and the spirituality of its instincts.

"Isn't it bad to be here, all alone?" Jane asked next, turning from the bustling street to the dim room, not without some fear in her eyes.

"I am always glad when my little friend comes in to see me."

"Mother will not always let me come when I want to come—she says it will trouble you. You are always writing—

writing, or reading hard books, she says. Do you ever write pretty stories? There was a gentleman here once who did—I couldn't read them, but mother said they were pretty; but he soon went away. Mother says he got a great deal of money and went to a grander house; but he wasn't nice, as you are; I never wanted to come in here then, he used to get in such a passion if Susan made any noise. Do you ever write pretty stories?"

Wilfred answered in the negative, and just then a voice called Jane; she asked her friend to go down the stairs with her, because they were dark, and he complied. Returned to his dim room Wilfred found himself thinking of "the gentleman who wrote pretty stories"—questioning whether he might not do something in that way with his swarming fancies. He walked up and down his room till candles and his frugal

tea were brought him. After tea that walking up and down was resumed. By-and-by he sat down and began to write. Goethe's boyish romances, which were numerous, were generally written in the form of letters,* as was "Werther" later. Wilfred's first attempt at prose fiction was begun in the same form; for many hours he wrote rapidly and unweariedly, memory and imagination working harmoniously, reproducing familiar scenes and forms of beauty in imaginary relations to themselves and to each other. As he proceeded a feverish haste possessed him—a dread lest any part of the fair thought-pageant should sweep by unnoted.

He was well-nigh outwearied, and the morning was not far off, when, the flickering of the expiring candles making it im-

* "Denn ich pflegte einen kleinen Roman zum Grunde zu legen, den ich in Briefen auszuführen liebte."—*Wahrheit und Dichtung.*

possible to write longer, he looked up, pushed back the hair from his heated brow, and exclaimed:—

"This will be happiness—this life within life!—this freedom of imagination! Surely I have found an unfailing source of happiness. I certainly am happy!"

The scene of this "happiness" was cheerless enough; the air was raw and murky, the fire had been out many hours, and there was nothing cheering in the smoky, flaring candle-light. He who was "happy" shook with cold and agitation—his brain burned, and his limbs were stiff and benumbed.

What matter? This was his first taste of the delight of that "drunkenness of composition,"* in which all individuality of sensation is lost; he was only conscious of joy in his work and of longing for thrifty rest, after which he might resume it. Pain does not

* M. Balzac.

always follow close upon pleasant excess. The young literary *roué* does not learn at once that excess in this, as in all other indulgence, defeats itself, and turns the cup of joy into bitterness:—that the over-worked brain acts upon the body, which then re-acts upon the brain, inducing that stupor of non-productiveness so bitterly humiliating to the artist, is a lesson not learnt from the first sin of excess.

Wilfred woke, feeling somewhat languid, but eager to resume his work. For many days he wrote well nigh incessantly: except that late in the wintry afternoons, when daylight failed, he generally took a rapid walk through the streets, he allowed himself no recreation. A sunset burning away in dingy fire, seen through the smoke of many chimneys; a young moon, striving to assert her fairness in spite of mists, both of earth and heaven; stars shining

down pure and serene through the haze of crime and misery hanging over the great city; long vistas of lamps, kindling one by one, through invisible agency; the vast proportions of the temples, both of God and Mammon, seen looming through the fogs:—at that time these common sights excited Wilfred's fancy more, and stirred more emotion within him, than, later in life, could the snow-covered mountains and blue lakes of Switzerland, the awful cascades and solemn forests of Norway, or any forms of the most perfect beauty, or most utter desolation of nature.

During this fever of production, wild and shadowy tales — in which his imagination worked upon the mystery and dread in which he enveloped his ignorance of facts concerning his birth and parentage—incomplete poems, and half thought-out essays, were thrown off one after the other—left

behind for something new, the scribbler pressing on as breathlessly as aimlessly.

On Christmas-eve the bells were ringing an unheeded refrain to Wilfred's thoughts, when little Jane brought him a note; it contained a few lines from Mrs. Landon, to remind him that he had promised long ago to spend Christmas-day at her house.

"When is Christmas-day, Jane?" Wilfred asked of the child, who lingered in the room as usual.

"Why, to-morrow!—don't you know? Mother has bought me a beautiful doll, but I must not play with it till after church-time to-morrow. There are such pretty things in the shops—I want to go out again and see them; but mother is too busy."

Wilfred pushed his papers into a drawer, sighing while he did so. As an interruption to work the festival was not welcome,

and he had no glad or gay associations with the time. Looking at the child beside him, he detected a wistful expression in the eyes fixed on his face; reading it aright, he told her to run and ask her mother if she might go out with him.

"I know I may," was the joyous answer. And the changed aspect of the pale little face did Wilfred good; making him conscious that he was not so isolated but that he had power to give pleasure, it made him feel less out of harmony with the season.

Jane soon returned, looking very pretty in the blue silk bonnet and white furs, of which she challenged Wilfred's admiration. As they set out together he felt quite proud of his companion; he obeyed all her wishes, listened—really listened—to all her prattle, and bought her more sweet and pretty things than she had had given her before "in all her Christmases put to-

gether." Not being without some natural delicacy of perception, the child at length ceased to express her admiration of the things she saw, lest Mr. Mason should fancy that she wished to possess them. Thinking she was tired, and, as the night was cold and she had a bad cough, not liking to keep her out long, he took her home.

Escaping from the mother's low-spirited and abject expressions of gratitude, he went out again for a solitary prowl about the streets. The sound of music drew him into a Roman Catholic chapel, where he narrowly escaped passing the night—for, having bowed his head down, to shut out everything external while he gave himself up to the enjoyment of sounds which thrilled through his heart and brain, as the music died into silence he fell asleep.

* * * * * *

There was only a family-party at Mr.

Landon's on Christmas-day. Blanche and Mary Southern were staying there, and a good many of Mr. Landon's relatives were assembled. Wilfred felt like one suddenly awakened from a dream; he found it difficult to keep up an appearance of interest in what was going on round him—difficult to avoid falling back into the interrupted dream-life. Want of due rest and of physical exercise were beginning to tell on him; he was shy and nervous, and carried this off by a manner which made those who had not known him before think him proud and supercilious.

The warm and pretty rooms, decked with flowers and evergreens, the brilliant lights and the elegant dresses of the ladies, combined to produce an atmosphere in so strong contrast to that of his mean and solitary lodgings, that he could not at first breathe freely in the one, having been long accus-

tomed to the other. Though Mrs. Landon paid him all possible attention, the children were Wilfred's grand resource.

"As I drove past Hope's, the great toy-shop, last evening, I thought I saw you there with a little girl," Mrs. Landon said, when she had expressed a fear that her Lily was troublesome to him.

"My landlady's daughter—a gentle little creature. She is the greatest, I may say the only, attraction the house has." Wilfred brightened into interest as he spoke.

"How fond you are of children!" Mrs. Landon exclaimed. "Why do you not come oftener and see ours? Herbert scolds us for seeing so little of you—by-the-by he complains that you are a wretched correspondent."

"You are very kind—he is very kind; but I have been very much occupied," Wilfred

answered, confusedly. Mrs. Landon did not like to question him as to his occupations, or to caution him about his health, as her mother would have done: she did not feel the same elder-sisterly ease with him that she had done at Beech Holmes. On the whole, Wilfred did not produce a favourable impression upon the Landons—and he was conscious that he did not: they thought him grown proud and reserved, and were afraid that he might resent as patronage their efforts to keep up intercourse with him. On his side—going home dissatisfied with himself, for a day or two feeling unsettled and restless—he formed the opinion that society was a luxury in which it was not good that a poor and struggling literary man should indulge, and that he should be wise to refuse all future invitations.

In spite of their disappointment in him, it was not long before the Landons wrote

to ask him to spend a Sunday with them. Unfortunately, this invitation was brought to him by little Jane when he was deeply engrossed in his work: he gave the child a mechanical smile and "thank you," and put the note down; it soon disappeared among sheets of manuscript, and its arrival was forgotten. It was not opened till many months afterwards, when he came upon it accidentally. Calling at the Landons' house then, to make what apology he could, he found the family out of town.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Concevoir, c'est jouir, c'est fumer des cigarettes enchantées; mais sans l'execution tout s'en va en rêve et en fumée."

" Wollt ihr hoch auf ihren Flügeln schweben
Wirft die Angst des Irdischen von euch!
Fliehet aus dem engen, dumpfen Leben
In des Ideals Reich!"

WILFRED repeated these lines of Schiller's; then muttered, with a bitter smile—

"Very fit advice for a taunting Mephistopheles to whisper in the ear of a starving Faust!"

Wilfred had just been startled, to find himself face to face with pennilessness. By

answering advertisements, he had made two attempts to get employment as a tutor; but references had been required in each case, as he might have known they would be, and he had not chosen to refer to Mr. Landon, his only friend in town.

He had also made an attempt, which had likewise proved unsuccessful, to get a tale published in a magazine in which two of his shorter poems (for which, however, no payment had been offered him) had appeared.

Now he sat, with his almost empty purse in his hand, pondering what to do next. If he had lately looked forward to gaining a livelihood by the pursuit of light, ephemeral literature, he had not contemplated giving himself up to a hack-literary life: he had planned that he could live upon next to nothing; had expected to earn this "next to nothing"

easily, and without infringing upon the time needful for the cultivation of what higher powers he might possess. He had said, again and again, that he was not ambitious, but, nevertheless, grand visions had floated before his eyes during the last few months.

Selecting what seemed to him the most finished story among the many he had thrown off, Wilfred sat up late into that night, correcting and recopying it, designing to offer it to the editor of the most popular miscellany of that day. Had he waited for sober day-light, he would probably have been struck by its crudity of conception and incoherence of execution, by its utter want of that "netteté" which has been called "le vernis des mâitres," and would have spared himself the pain of its rejection; but the kindly note, which informed him of its fate, contained a courteous

invitation to "try again," some hints as to the kind of "article" likely to meet with the success of acceptance, and several expressions of encouragement.

Wilfred, tossing the manuscript into the fire, in the first heat of disappointment and mortification, exclaimed that his genius was not to be dictated to: then he coloured at his own arrogance in using a word, to him so sacred, in connection with such worthless matter as was contained in his poor pages.

For some days after this disappointment he did nothing but eat, sleep, and roam the streets, in a state of morbid despondency. When the end of the week came, he parted with some of his books, that he might be able to meet his landlady. On Sunday—a fair spring Sunday—he started for a long walk; his mood was black and despairing, and he took very little heed

where he went; but when he found himself in the fields, breathed upon by a south wind and with the mild sunshine falling on him, found himself alone beneath a budding tree, at the root of which clustered wide and mild-eyed primroses, then his mood changed wholly: he threw himself down upon the turf—tears came into his eyes as he gazed into those of the fair primroses—he felt weak as a little child, but quiet and happy.

"It is worth living through a bleak and cheerless winter only to feel and see the beauty of spring—worth living a bleak and cheerless life to enter just now and then into the full enjoyment of mere being. Thy earth is fair and good, even in Thy sight, Father! In this sweet air and warm sunshine I feel Thy loving breath! Thou hast made no creature in vain—teach me Thy will with me."

After murmuring these and similar words, Wilfred fell into deep meditation; but his consideration of his position and prospects, though calm, was quite inconclusive; so, turning his thoughts from a vexed and distasteful subject, he gave himself up to enjoyment of the lovely scene and of his own vague dreams and aspiring fancies. His enjoyment was pure—but may we give ourselves up to the purest enjoyment whenever it offers itself? Is the wisdom of those who do so the wisdom of children of this generation, or of children of light? Should not Wilfred, finding his brain clear and passions calm, have bent his reason and will to the solving of the problem of how, and for what, to live? If he erred, his error was rewarded. Tender and graceful thoughts and images—unconsciously the primroses had called up the memory of Felicia — gathered together in

his imagination, and clustered harmoniously to a beautiful whole.

Pacing up and down the sun-quickened hedgerow, or lying beneath the tree, Wilfred let morning pass into afternoon, and afternoon deepen into evening, before he turned his steps towards London.

He was hungry and tired enough when he reached his lodging. His poor room looked almost homelike. Jane, for whom he had remembered to gather a bunch of flowers, was watching for him; and his tea, to which, in consideration of his having had no dinner, cold meat and a nice, fresh-looking salad had been added, was ready — the kettle singing beside a cheerful fire.

"Mother is at church. I might not go, because of my cough. Mother said that, for a treat, I might stay here till you came home; but that I must not stay after

you came in, unless you asked me," Jane explained this, confidently expecting the invitation she desired.

When she had received it she was at ease to express her delight with the flowers. "And, oh! I am so glad you are come back," she added, "for I was getting very frightened. I heard mother telling Susan such dreadful things about a lodger she had once, who drowned himself in the river on a Sunday. And mother said you had been looking so badly lately."

"You foolish little maiden!—you are always frightened about something or other. But come, you must make my tea for me; only I will carry the teapot to the kettle —it is too heavy for you to lift."

Wilfred piled some books on a chair, and lifted the child up upon this perch, in front of the tea-tray. Here she was in her glory—very sorry when "mother"

and bed-time came together. She prattled faster, her eyes were brighter, and her cheeks redder than usual.

"I hope she hasn't been troublesome, sir," her mother said, when, the child in bed, she came to take away Wilfred's tea-things. Speaking, she sighed, as was her frequent fashion—"She wont be troublesome to anyone long, I'm thinking," was added in a lower voice and with a heavier sigh, as she left the room.

Wilfred pondered over her words uneasily; the next time he saw her, when Jane was not by, he asked their meaning.

"O! she's going sir—that's all!"

"Going! You don't mean——"

"Dying, sir, that's it; all the others went—she's the last, and she's going. It don't so much matter this time; I just work on while there's one of them left. She's

the last; when she's gone, then I shall just go too."

"But, Mrs. Morgan, Jane does not seem ill; you must not be so down-hearted—you must be more hopeful."

"I know the cough, sir—haven't I heard it again and again? I know the look of the eyes, too, and the waxy white round the mouth."

"But, if she is ill, you must do something for her—you must try country air. How she would enjoy picking primroses! Have you had advice?"

"Nothing makes any difference—she'll go; the others did, do what I would. You're very good and kind——"

Here the woman's stolid calm gave way—she burst into tears, dropped into a chair, and sobbed convulsively.

Wilfred's cheek paled in the presence of this real human sorrow; racking his brain

for consoling words, he was bitterly grieved to be unable, by reason of his empty purse, to make any offer to pay for medical advice, for change of air—for any of those things on which, in such cases, hope builds.

Mrs. Morgan soon recovered composure, and set about that work of tidying up the room, which was never left to Susan now, saying, as she did so:—

"Don't notice me—don't pity me! that knocks me down sooner than all, sir, and I must last out till she's gone."

Wilfred could not ask his landlady to wait a week for the week's rent, because he knew she wanted money; so more of his cherished books were disposed of. Before a third Saturday came, however, a story of his had been accepted by the friendly editor who had refused the other: what seemed to him a considerable sum

of money was now in his hands. Nothing gives unmixed pleasure to a morbidly susceptible temperament like Wilfred's—this success came to him with its bloom rubbed off. He had been requested to call upon Mr. Brook, the editor in question, and had done so; his reception had been cordial; the criticism bestowed upon his writing was genial, sympathetic, and encouraging; and yet Wilfred had felt his soul shrink and shiver beneath this criticism, as exotic, hot-house plants might do upon having a healthful English breeze let in upon them; while the bright, penetrating eyes of the speaker had seemed to him to be painfully sharp, and cruelly piercing.

As he returned from this interview, Wilfred made a resolution that, if he followed the profession of literature, he would, as much as possible, avoid contact

with his fellow-workers; imagining that nothing would so much tend to dispel artistic illusions, and to rub off the freshness and bloom of fancy, as would the so-called "mixing in literary circles."

The strict adherence to this resolution, by which Wilfred showed that persistent obstinacy in small matters which is often seen in men who are weak and wavering in important things, made him some enemies, and caused him, in the days of partially-achieved success, to be as lonely as in those of early aspiration and struggling endeavour.

Notwithstanding all drawbacks, the possession of his first-earned gold brought a sense of joy and power with it. Reaching his lodgings, Wilfred's first thought was of little Jane; his first words were of inquiry for her—for a few days he had lost sight of her.

"She's very bad to-day, sir—she's

been talking, wandering like, the night through. She won't get up to-day."

When Wilfred begged Mrs. Morgan to send for any medical man in whom she had confidence, she complied, more to gratify Wilfred than because she had any hope. The physician for whom she sent having visited the little sufferer, Wilfred questioned him as to what could be done to arrest the progress of disease — questioned him closely and eagerly.

The doctor's answer—that he was called in too late, that the child was surely marked for death—cruelly robbed Wilfred's first success of the gloss of unselfish joy. —"'Too late!'—in this world all good things come too late," he murmured to himself.

Towards the evening of that day Mrs. Morgan came to Wilfred in great distress; she begged him to go up and see Jane,

and try if he could in any way quiet her. She added, by way of explanation—

"That silly Susan has let out what the doctor said, and fear'll kill the child at once, I'm thinking."

Wilfred followed her up the narrow attic stairs to where the child lay. He shuddered to hear the stifled cries which were only interrupted by terrible fits of coughing.

The unexpected appearance of her friend startled little Jane into quietness; she fell back on her pillow exhausted, and lay still, her hand in his.

The poor mother left them together.

Presently the child said, in a timid whisper:—

"Susan is wicked to tell stories. I shall not die, Mr. Mason, shall I? That kind gentleman did not say so, did he?"

Wilfred's soothing, evasive answers and loving words drew the child on to let him see of what her ignorant notion of death consisted—first of being laid in the wormy, foul earth of the black churchyard, close by, peering through the railings of which she had often watched an interment; then of suffering, with some part of herself which she had heard called her soul, fiery and endless torments, in that hell which Susan had threatened her with when she had been a naughty child; and she thought she had very often been a naughty child, and that God must be so angry that "he would let the devil have her."

As she ran on with feverish, frightened talk—questioning Wilfred as to this hell, this devil, and the amount of her own sinfulness—his spirit stood aghast at the hideousness of the horrors crowding the poor child's mind; recalling how the idea

of giving her regular instruction had occurred to him, only to be lightly abandoned; he felt that he was culpable — that this ignorance which left room for such ghastly images was a sin to lie heavy upon his conscience. All he could now do to retrieve his error of omission he did, faithfully and unwearyingly.

Without directly answering Jane's questions, he began to speak of a churchyard in the country, where beautiful grass and flowers grew upon graves shaded by trees in which birds sang sweetly, and where little children came to play and gather daisies. He drew such a picture of the prettiness and the peace of the place, dwelling on details likely to captivate a child's fancy, that when he ended, Jane said:—

"I should not so much mind dying if I might be taken to such a nice place as that."

Wilfred gave her his earnest promise that she should be taken to just such a place. Soothed by this, and by his gentle tones, she became quiet. The room was getting dark now, presently he thought by her breathing that she had fallen asleep. But when he rose to go she started up, cried that he must not leave her—that the room was full of horrid things. Terror again took full possession of her; she uttered shrieks that turned his blood cold to hear.

Wilfred felt that the most difficult work was yet to do; he procured a light, and then began to speak of God as a tender Father, who was especially tender to children; of Jesus as one who loved children, and called them round him, though we are not told that they were all "quite good" children; he tried to make it clear to Jane that it was no

more probable that a God, who was a God of love and mercy, should suffer any devil to "take away" and torment one of his creatures, than that her mother would permit any bad person to take away and ill-use her little daughter. He talked on and on, surprised at the readiness of his own *faith for the child*, and at the ease with which words came to his tongue. Jane listened with a thirsty face, that gradually grew less eager and fevered. At last, her evil spirit cast out for a time, she slept a calm, cool sleep.

But though Jane received all Wilfred told her, with unquestioning faith, one hour's talk could not enlighten the superstition, or banish the terror, which had been the growth of years. The poor child's paroxysms of frenzied fear recurred again and again, though happily with ever-diminishing violence.

Every evening, therefore, before dusk began to gather, if Jane were not well enough to be brought to the sofa in his own room, Wilfred now took his station by the tiny bed in the attic; with soothing talk, or a story told or read, he whiled away the dreaded hour between day-light and candle-light. Oranges, grapes, ice, early strawberries, any cool and pleasant dainty that suggested itself to his imagination, or hers, it was his pleasure to procure for little Jane.

Just at this time he received a kind and urgent invitation to Beech Holmes, to be present at Blanche Southern's wedding:—

"It is real May-time now—soft and sunny—more pleasant and lovely than you, in smoky London, can imagine," Mrs. Southern wrote. "Our bride and our bridesmaids will be bonnie—and, altogether, the wedding will be a pretty

night. Do come; we all, and especially Herbert and Felicia, count upon your presence."

Wilfred did not for a moment hesitate how to answer. If Jane had been his own dying child it could not have seemed more impossible to him to leave her side than it now did. In his letter, which he strove to make express his deep gratitude for Mrs. Southern's kind remembrance, he merely stated that it was impossible for him to leave town at present, without giving any reason why it was impossible: if they did him less than justice on receiving that answer, later, when the truth oozed out, one of them at least did him more than justice, thinking his self-denial most chivalrous and heroic.

As the child's end drew near, Wilfred often watched by her half the night,

while her mother took some sorely-needed rest.

If Jane slept, he thought much at these times—of the sweetness of human ties and the agony of their breaking—of his own absolute loneliness—of there being no one who would keep a watch of love by his bed of sickness, or a watch of sorrow by his bed of death. And perhaps it would be so ever—perhaps he might never call any woman "wife," or have any child to call him "father."

One morning when the mother came to relieve his watch he relinquished the tiny hand, that lay cool and listless in his own, with peculiar reluctance, and the light pressure of his lips on the marble-pale brow was a long, lingering pressure. That day little Jane died! She was buried in a country churchyard—such a one as Wilfred

had described to her. Her friend often visited the place, often stood beside the small mound, gazing on the simple head-stone which he had put up to mark the place where she had been laid to rest.

For many a day there was a sore spot and an aching void in Wilfred's heart. Many a time he found himself listening for light feet on the stairs, or looking with wistful expectancy towards his opening door. Experiencing a new pang of loss, he returned to his work in an embittered mood, which mirrored itself in that work. This little creature—this one human being who had brightened his life by her love—this his one ewe-lamb—might have been spared to him, he thought. Giving himself up entirely to the fitful and fantastic prompting of his powerful but morbid imagination, he allowed his practical human sympathies to narrow daily. His longing for idealized

ties, for a form of happiness which he believed to be impossible for him, grew and deepened in proportion as his life became more and more isolated and barren.

Long after he could have afforded better accommodation — for he met with more success than was wholesome for him at this crisis—he remained at those dingy lodgings; perhaps as much from apathy and indolence as from consciousness of a lingering charm about them. It was not till Mrs. Morgan gave up the house—going to die among country friends — that he left it. Then he left London altogether for a time; but this was not till little Jane had been dead "a weary while"—as her mother said—not till he counted the time he had occupied those rooms by years rather than by months.

CHAPTER IX.

"——God's chief angel waiteth for
A brother's voice to sing;
And a lonely creature of sinful nature—
It is an awful thing."

EXCESSIVE, suicidal work, without any worthy aim, to very little worthy result, alternated in Wilfred's life with an utter idleness—during which he was morbidly miserable, and believed all literary power lost to him for ever — according as the urgent need for the mental action of expression, or the apathetic dulness following upon over-strained effort, effacing all belief in any good, possessed him.

In his most morbid moods "to win a name" was now a dread rather than an ambition.

"Who is this Mason?" he fancied he heard people enquire, after he had published a novel which attracted considerable attention. Imagination would run riot in answering the question it had itself suggested —depicting various depths of inherited infamy into which the revelation of his real name might some day plunge him. Sometimes he would be so far possessed by his demon of self-torment as to hear a mocking intonation in any voice that addressed him as "Mason," and to read dubious questioning in the eyes of any stranger who chanced to glance at him. Wrapping himself more and more within himself, he excused himself to accusing conscience by pleading that he had no right to make friends—no right to receive or confer benefits; that he did

well to shrink from his fellows now, as they might, when the time came, shrink from him.

Of course these morbidly miserable moods sometimes made way for brighter ones. There were seasons when to walk in the sunshine—to look at a beautiful picture or a beautiful face — to listen to grand or touching music — to read noble prose or exquisite verse — or to be conscious of a creative stirring in his own mind—seemed to fill his whole being with a vivid joy; so that he would say, "Life is worth living for, if it only brings just a few moments of such joy as this!"

Walking along a street one morning, in one of his dreariest moods, he was aware that, for a few moments, some one had pertinaciously kept pace with him: but he did not care to turn his head till a hand was passed through his arm. Looking round

then, he looked straight into Herbert Southern's eyes, beaming with fun and friendliness.

"It does my heart good to see you!" he said, coming to a dead stop—"mischievous as ever! I felt that some one was keeping close by me, but supposed it only accident. I did not dream of your being in town."

"You must come with me at once; I was on my way to hunt you out. My mother and Felicia are also in town."

"At Mrs. Landon's?"

"Yes."

"I should like of all things to see them; but—"

"No buts; I know that you have treated the Landons, and all of us, abominably; but we will forgive you if you will behave rationally now."

They walked on together, chatting gaily—for Wilfred's dreariness could not re-

sist the contagion of Herbert's cheery, hearty kindness. When they reached the Landons' door, Herbert said—

"I shall try and pass you off as a stranger—you are very much altered, and I didn't say I was going to try and find you."

"Always looking out for a joke, as of old," Wilfred remarked, rather nervously.

"You don't blame me? There's much work and little play in my life at present—in most lives always. Though all the knockers in this street are on the broad grin, I daresay they see funerals pass as often as they see weddings."

So saying, he laid a vigorous hand on the facetious knocker, and gave a rap that made Wilfred's nerves vibrate.

Mrs. Southern was alone in the drawing-room when the young men entered it: the green Venetian blinds were down, and her sight was not very good. Herbert intro-

duced Wilfred to his mother, as he would have introduced a stranger, slurring over the name. For the time she was quite deceived. After a few moments had been passed in grave discussion of the weather, and of the gaiety of town-life at this season, Felicia came into the room; she hesitated a moment, but Herbert went through a formal introduction of his friend Mr. ——, making an almost inarticulate sound, to "my youngest sister."

As Wilfred rose, a sunbeam straying in between the blinds fell on his face. Felicia's colour deepened; she turned a pretty, perplexed look, first on her mother, then on Herbert, as she took a seat. Felicia was now no longer a child; she had lost something of her childish beauty, and had not yet gained womanly grace; her face seldom struck strangers as beautiful, but all observant eyes turned to it again and

again, loving to dwell on its pure colouring, its delicate refinement of form, and its expression of calm sense, quiet goodness, and gentle candour.

Receiving no information from either of her questioning looks, Felicia, seated beside her mother, took up her work; but when Wilfred spoke—he had only bowed as he was introduced to her—flushing crimson, she turned to her mother, and said softly,

"Mamma! It is Wilfred! Isn't it? Herbert is playing us a trick."

Mrs. Southern had been secretly puzzling herself over the familiarity of the voice.

"Why, Herbert, you rogue, to deceive your old mother!" she now exclaimed. Extending both hands to Wilfred, in cordial welcome, she added, "I am delighted to see you—delighted to have the oppor-

tunity of thanking you for some truly pleasant hours, and of congratulating you on your success. We are very clever now, we always find you out. I should have been deeply disappointed if I had gone back to Beech Holmes without having seen you."

Genuine pleasure lit up Wilfred's face and shone in his soft eyes, as he returned the pressure of Mrs. Southern's hands.

Herbert stood by, enjoying his partial success.

"But Felicia was not half taken in," he said, regretfully.

"Should *you* have known *her?*" asked her mother.

"Anywhere. I do not think she is altered," Wilfred answered.

He saw the same loving serenity in her eyes—the same simple, happy smile on

her mouth, and did not observe other changes, till he found that the child who used to be far below his elbow was now a maiden, literally "as high as his heart."

When Mrs. Landon joined them, Wilfred had been so thoroughly roused and humanized by surprise and pleasure, that he made his much-needed apologies with graceful earnestness. They were accepted graciously, yet in a way that showed they were not felt to be needless.

After having accompanied his friends on their morning round of sight-seeing, Wilfred returned with them to the Landons, to dine and spend the evening there. Herbert, who was in practice in the North with his brother-in-law, John Landon, was obliged to leave town next day. He begged Wilfred to be his mother's occasional escort while she remained, and an

appointment was made for the very next morning.

Mrs. Southern had no remorse in occupying Wilfred's time. She thought he looked overworked, and as if a holiday would do him good; so for a fortnight he was in almost daily attendance, escorting Mrs. Southern, Mrs. Landon, and Felicia to such places as they wished to visit.

Felicia was always the member of the party most immediately under his charge; and to her, child as he still thought her —perhaps because he thought her such a child—he spoke more of his outer and inner life than he had ever spoken to anyone before; so that, guided by her clear sense, she came to have some idea of its peculiar loneliness, its peculiar trials, and its peculiar temptations. To her, too, he spoke of little Jane—of what she had

been to him, and of how he had missed her. Quite unconsciously, he talked above his ordinary self when he talked to Felicia; just as, with many other people, he kept the most precious things of his soul secret and hidden, and involuntarily lowered his ordinary standard of principles and convictions.

From whatever cause it arose—whether from love of ease, or from want of moral weight to balance a too great love of approbation—it is certain that Wilfred, whose intellectual individuality was sharp and clear, had, at this time, a dangerous pliability and adaptability of ethical character. Believing Felicia to be completely pure and loving—all that is most excellent in child and woman combined—the contact of her being elevated the tone of his own. It is possible that he somewhat idealized a good child—but that is no

matter; the influence was the same as if she had been all angel, as he imagined her, and as no child or woman is. For her his best and deepest qualities were always those uppermost. Content to revere where she could not understand, and finding food for reverence in what she did understand, this close and confidential intercourse only tended to foster and confirm the tender, pitying, and yet almost worshiping, admiration which Felicia already entertained for the young author.

Almost always calm, her enthusiasm and romance being as undemonstrative as they were deep-seated, most people regarded Felicia as just a thoughtful, practical, and amiable little creature; certainly not clever, still more certainly not poetical, therefore not in danger from influences to which they would have hesitated to expose a more susceptible and imaginative girl.

She was not clever; in that they were right—her intellect was neither quick nor particularly clear: nor was she highly imaginative—while her susceptibility was of so fine and subtle a nature as seldom to be perceptible through the veil of habitual reticence. Her understanding seemed to lie almost wholly in her affections—she appreciated beauty with her heart, not with her mind; her nature was one in which a rare candour and a rare reserve were exquisitely well balanced.

From what Wilfred had said about his landlady's little daughter, Felicia had gathered how good he had been to her, and that for her sake he had declined to visit Beech Holmes. Other things of a similar nature she secretly treasured in her heart till, long after, some real or fancied attack upon her hero led her to pour them out

as so many triumphant proofs of his goodness and gentleness of heart.

The last day of Mrs. Southern's stay in town was a sad day for Wilfred. When he was alone with the mother and daughter, Mrs. Southern asked him if he would not now take back his letter—Felicia had brought it to town with her, in case he should be willing to do so, she said.

Wilfred looked earnestly at Felicia — her colour had risen, and tears stood in her eyes.

"Would *you* rather I took it? Is the care of it a trouble—a burden to you?" he asked her.

"Oh, no; indeed no! Dear mamma, let me keep it still, if Wilfred wishes it."

"Does Wilfred much wish it?"

"In taking it from Felicia, I should feel as if she and you both gave me up

—as if there were no longer any link between me and my only friends."

"You would be a very absurd boy to feel any such thing; if there is ever any giving up in the case, it will be you who give us up. However, you must have your own way: let things be as they are for the present."

While receiving warm thanks from both Felicia and Wilfred, Mrs. Southern had an undefined consciousness of having done unwisely in allowing herself to earn them; however, as the deed was done, she strove to overcome that feeling.

Next morning Wilfred went early to Mrs. Landon's, meaning to accompany his friends to the station. Felicia was in the drawing-room alone when he arrived; she sat by the window, and did not hear him enter. When he approached her, the eyes raised to his were full of tears; there

was a sweet sadness about her mouth too—few mouths can look so sad, and at the same time so perfectly sweet, as did Felicia's.

"You have had a happy visit," he said, as he seated himself by her; "but you are not sorry to go back to Beech Holmes?"

"Oh, no!"

"You are grieved to leave your sister?"

"Oh, no! for she is coming to us very soon."

As Wilfred's eyes still questioned her, she looked up into them bravely, and said—

"I was thinking of you—it was that made me feel sad."

"Of me, my child?"

"They say you have no friends here—that you are not happy—you will miss us."

Wilfred took one of the child's hands

in his and answered, speaking very softly:—

"Indeed I shall miss you, but I hope to be happier and better for having been so much with you. I will be happier and better if only for your sake. You have done me great good, dear child. I will not forget what I owe you. God bless you, and give you all happiness!"

She joined her other little hand timidly over the one he held; he bent down and kissed it; when he raised his head and met her eyes, the unconscious love they expressed made him tremble, filling him with a sense of trouble and of delicious awe. But the loving eyes were serene, now the tears had fallen from them they did not lower themselves before his; nor did the colour on her cheek deepen. Felicia did not tremble, though, silly child as she was, she felt a thrill at the touch of her hero's lips upon her hand,

believed that touch to have in it something sacred and consecrating which made a feeling of holy happiness steal over her.

For a long time she did not willingly offer that hand to any casual acquaintance.

CHAPTER X.

"Alas! both heart and brain are dull and dusk—
That which lies here is but a graceless husk;
Although of violets, sweet-briar, and musk
The o'er-scratched pages tell,
I know, alas! full well,
But little fragrance in the thoughts doth dwell!

"How fain would I that this my work were fair!
Bright as the gleam of her dear golden hair,
Pure as her child-heart, so that I might dare
Lay it before my Queen,
And see her eyes serene
Raised from its pages large with loving sheen."

BY the next spring Wilfred had written, re-written, retouched with most fastidious care and dainty patience, and at last come to regard as complete, a poem which it

was then his ambition to get published, that he might send a daintily-bound copy to Felicia. He had never before written with so much purpose and quiet diligence; had never expended so much subtle refining care on any work. In spite of his despair, contrasting what it was with what he had hoped and dreamt it would be, he was conscious that this poem was more powerfully imagined and consistently executed—had more reality and worth than anything, either prose or poetry, which he had previously written.

He took it first to a house which had published his novel, and had offered him liberal terms for his next "work of fiction;" but the firm declined undertaking the publication of his poem. When it had been also declined by three other firms, the author took his manuscript home, saying that it must bide its time—wait till

he could get it printed at his own expense. Though this was said calmly, the disappointment was bitter. Wilfred had not suffered himself to have any other work on hand while he wrote this poem—he had given himself up to it entirely: it was done for Felicia, and if it were not well done it should not be through carelessness. Though he had lived frugally, he now found that his finances were at a low ebb; he felt ill, too—unfit for any brain work.

He lingered in London during the summer months; sometimes almost prostrated by low fever, sometimes well enough to write a chapter or two of the novel which had been so long set aside. Tempestuous autumn weather set in early. It was just at the close of this summer that Mrs. Morgan at last resolved to give up the house in which he had lodged so

long; the furniture was to be sold off; the lodgers were, of course, forced to depart. Being, as it were, turned out of doors, Wilfred was seized with an uncontrollable longing to meet the fierce wind on some sea-shore, or in some mountainous country.

By parting with the remainder of his books, with very few exceptions—disposing of part of his wardrobe, and schooling his pride so far as to request the payment of a small sum which had long been owing to him, Wilfred got together money enough to gratify this longing. He made his way into North Wales, and took up his quarters at a road-side inn near a small fishing-village. The place had little but its cheapness and quiet, and an almost savage wildness, to recommend it: the shore was low and sandy; the sea generally

broke on it with a heavy thud, in long sweeps of turbid surf; inland a sandy plain, overgrown by hardy plants—the sand-rose, the sea-pink, yellow poppy, and blue sea-thistle, things of a briny and prickly nature, yet not without a beauty of their own—was bounded by a bank of low hills, beyond which, one behind another, rose several mountain ranges.

Such was Abergwynn: its bracing air revived Wilfred; its wildness in that wild weather deeply pleased him; the wind and waves were boisterous and health-giving companions.

He had been there nearly two months, when, as he lay on a patch of shingle one sunshiny morning after a gale—watching the advance and retreat of huge breakers, and speculating whether the tide would roll in as far as a certain sea-thistle—he by and by saw a lady and gentleman,

mounted on Welsh ponies, come round a low point at the extremity of the bay, and scour the sands to and fro, keeping close to the water's edge. Wilfred now watched them instead of the breakers—for he usually had the whole stretch of shore to himself; he saw them presently leave the sands and turn their ponies inland. Listlessly wondering who they might be, he had returned to the contemplation of the waves, when the lady flew close by him—half blinding him with the sand and shingle thrown up by her pony's hoofs. Disgusted at the rudeness of the act, and not inclined to run any further risk of being trampled on, he rose and began to stroll from the spot, farther along the bay.

"Stop her!—for heaven's sake, stop her!" a voice cried after him.

He turned. The speaker was a short, somewhat stout, elderly man, who had

apparently been thrown from his horse, for he was covered with dust and sand, and seemed to be half-paralysed by fear.

After a glance into his horror-stricken face, Wilfred swept the shore with his eyes for the cause of this alarm ; but he did not immediately discover it.

"Where is she?" he asked.

Looking then in the direction in which the gentleman pointed, he saw the lady; she was still clinging to her little steed, which was plunging wildly in the foamy waters, struggling seawards. Wilfred was soon at the water's edge, close to her ; just at that moment a crested wave swept completely over both horse and rider.

"Get off!—throw yourself into the water, and I can save you!" Wilfred shouted, when the wave had retreated.

The girl turned a white, resolute face towards him for a moment, and shook her

head; then she again bent over her pony — patting its neck, talking to it, using every effort to turn its head towards the shore, without success. The frightened creature plunged about frantically; it was already almost out of its depth — another large wave would, in its retreat, sweep it out to sea. The gentleman now stood by Wilfred's side, screaming and shouting; but the girl appeared to pay little heed.

There was no time to be lost: they both saw a huge billow gathering; the girl saw it too — for she raised her head a moment, and then seemed to redouble her efforts. A few instants later Wilfred's arms were thrown round her; he pulled her from her saddle and dragged her a few feet nearer the shore; then the wave overtook them, broke over them, and knocked them down. When it had passed he rose, succeeded in carrying his burden to a safe distance,

and then fell down breathless and exhausted.

The lady sprang to her feet immediately. Freeing her eyes from her wet and heavy hair, she looked out seawards—to see a dark object borne farther and farther out.

"My poor Mountaineer, she is lost! I might have saved her!" she cried, as much in anger as in grief.

"But for this gentleman you would now be out of reach of human help, as your pony is, Eleanour."

"Possibly! I meant to save the poor beast, or to share her fate!"

She turned sullenly from her father to look at Wilfred, who, resting on his arm, was slowly regaining breath. At first her large eyes kept a resentful expression in them; then, extending her hand to her pale deliverer, she said:—

"Let me help you to get up. I don't

know that my life was worth the trouble you have taken, and I think I might have saved the pony if you had left me alone; but you acted bravely, and I suppose that I ought to thank you."

Wilfred rose without touching the proffered hand—the girl's tone displeased him. Turning from her with a bow, he said to the gentleman,

"I believe I can be of no further assistance; unless, if you are far from home, you would like me to try and get you some conveyance."

"I shall walk home, papa," the girl said; then, looking out to sea again, she muttered, "My poor Mountaineer!—it's far worse to you to meet death than it would have been to me; you battled fiercely —I think I should have kept calm."

"What frightened the lady's horse?" Wilfred asked.

"Some heaps of burning rubbish. It would not go through the smoke. My daughter strove to make it, and it wheeled round and dashed straight into the water."

Having gathered up her wet habit, the lady began to walk towards the point from behind which Wilfred had seen her appear; but she suddenly paused, turned back to him, and said:—

"Papa has his hat to find, and his pony to give orders about. You are wet—will you walk home with me at once? Our house must be nearer than yours."

Wilfred declined the invitation, and she immediately turned from him with an air of having done a disagreeable duty.

The gentleman, having had time to collect his scattered ideas, now warmly seconded his daughter's invitation—warmly expressed his own gratitude, telling Wilfred that he felt indebted to his courage and presence of mind

for the life of his only daughter. He could not, however, prevail upon Wilfred to accept of his hospitality.

"I am afraid my daughter's manner seemed cold—pray excuse her. Mountaineer was a great pet; she will feel more grateful when she has got over the first shock of her loss," he said, apologetically.

A boy now brought up the gentleman's hat and his pony, which, after throwing its rider, had remained quietly feeding near the spot. Unwilling to keep Wilfred standing in his wet clothes, he took leave of him and followed his daughter, leading his pony by the bridle.

That night Wilfred's rest was disturbed by dreams which distorted and grotesquely misrepresented the events of the morning—continually presenting to his imagination that unnaturally calm, white face, surrounded by clinging masses of wet hair,

and lighted by large, resentful eyes. By daylight, too, and as he sat at breakfast in the inn parlour, he thought a good deal of his strange adventure—recalled the half-contemptuous gesture with which the girl had extended her glittering wet, white hand to him, and marvelled how much there was of reality, how much of affectation, in the indifference to life which she had expressed.

Before he had risen from the breakfast-table, a groom rode up to the inn door. Wilfred's window was open—he heard the man enquire of the landlord whether he had a gentleman staying in the house; receiving an affirmative answer, he further asked if that gentleman had been on the shore yesterday morning when his lady's horse took fright. A moment after two notes were brought to Wilfred, with a message that Squire Narpenth's groom waited for his answer.

The note Wilfred opened first was from Mr. Narpenth, reiterating yesterday's expressions of gratitude, inviting Wilfred to take up his quarters at his house for as long as he remained in the neighbourhood, and begging that he would do so in time for a six o'clock dinner on that day.

Wilfred hastened to write an answer: expressing his pleasure at having been of service, he briefly declined to avail himself of the invitation. It was not till the man had ridden off with this answer that Wilfred opened the second note.

It was written in a foreign-looking, rather cramped hand—began and ended abruptly:—

"My father tells me that my conduct yesterday was ungrateful and unwomanly; for the ingratitude I ask your pardon—for your exertion on my behalf I thank you, and I hope you have not suffered from

that exertion. Of course you could not know that I valued my pony's life to the full as highly as my own; no doubt you acted with the best intentions.

"I suppose the death you saved me from would have been terrible. I have not slept for seeing and hearing those angry, hungry waves. My poor Mountaineer! Do you blame me for thinking more of her fate than of my own safety?

"We shall see you to-day. In the meanwhile, I have said to my unknown deliverer that I thank him. I wish that the life he has saved were more valuable to its owner."

This was the whole of the note which, many years afterwards, remained to bear strange witness to the singular commencement of a singular intercourse. Why Wilfred did not destroy that note he did not know; he did not keep the father's.

"If I had accepted her father's invitation—which, by-the-by, she takes for granted that I shall do—how would she have treated me, I wonder? Condescendingly, I suppose; she is evidently a haughty woman—how different from anything Felicia can ever become! I should like to know what displeases her in her fate, just out of curiosity, she is not a woman to inspire warmer interest; at the same time, more especially as she takes my coming for granted, I am glad I have refused her father's invitation."

Had Wilfred wished to avail himself of Mr. Narpenth's offer of hospitality, he could hardly have done so—yesterday's saturation with salt-water had not improved a rough travelling suit, which, with the exception of one much shabbier, constituted the whole of his wardrobe.

Afraid that Mr. Narpenth's gratitude and consciousness of obligation would not let

him rest content without making some further friendly overtures, Wilfred felt that the solitary charm of Abergwynn was gone: he left it that day.

CHAPTER XI.

"Ach, was soll der Mensch verlangen?
Ist es besser ruhig bleiben?
Klammernd fest sich anzuhangen?
Ist es besser sich zu treiben?"

RETURNING to London in vigorous health, Wilfred settled himself to work, having hired a cheap lodging, one room at the top of a tall house, in an even more plebeian quarter than that he had before inhabited. At first he was happy here, for he had plenty of work to do, and abundant energy with which to do it. While he laboured with faith and hope his outward circumstances affected him but little. Till his novel was

finished he had not much to live upon; he even found that dining at home was a too expensive habit—sometimes he dined at a cheap eating-house, sometimes he did not dine at all. For a few months he was certainly happy; it seemed to do him good to have to fight with outward enemies—to have to work to keep cold and hunger at bay; he was then in no temper, and had no time, for indulgence in the morbid miseries of imagination—for he worked earnestly; but the battle was long and hard, and he grew weak and weary. When his work was finished, fairly finished, and before the public, he was in no mood to enjoy or to value success, such as he achieved; he had spent himself in the fight, without caring for the result of victory—at least without caring for such things as were likely to be the result of victory. The feather-weight of the paper crown won seemed

enough to crush him—the wreath of puny nineteenth-century laurels was as a crown of thorns.

The novel which had been so long on hand, a volume of essays, and a small volume of short poems, were all published early in this autumn. They were all well received, all proved more or less successful. As his purse grew heavy, it seemed that his heart grew heavy with it.

Sitting in his dingy upper chamber, weakened in body and mind by privation and overwork, he wept tears of anguished and pitiable self-pity over the isolation which made prosperity so utterly valueless. What was success to him?—a glaring light thrown into the chambers of his soul, to show him the ghastly dread inhabiting there. So complete was his self-imposed loneliness that he had not one friend to rejoice with him—he did not receive one

congratulatory hand-shake which he could believe was that of warm, disinterested affection. Of the Landons he had seen nothing since his return to London; they did not know where to find him. His last letter to Herbert Southern remained unanswered, for the simple reason that, while he had told Herbert that he had given up his former rooms, he had given him no new address; so he felt himself cut off from the sympathy even of the Beech Holmes circle—fancied that even there, even by Felicia, he was by this time forgotten.

One sultry night, late in September, Wilfred leant from his open window, and watched a storm gathering over the city. At the top and at the back of the lofty house, his window commanded a wide extent of chimneys and of smoke-darkened sky. The day had been one of stifling closeness;

during it he had not had energy enough to leave the house, but had merely lounged away the hours, hoping that the evening coolness would bring him relief.

Suddenly the wind, which preceded the breaking of the storm, swept in and swept round his room, scattering his papers. This blast seemed to have a magical effect on Wilfred; it gave him energy to long and to resolve — within five minutes of its coming he had determined to leave England next day.

When the storm broke, as it seemed, right overhead, he did not heed and hardly heard it—he was writing a farewell-letter to Mrs. Southern, telling her of his plans, of his sufferings, of his intense weariness of life. To her he poured out the garnered-up bitterness of his soul—speaking of the mocking hollowness of success which there was nothing to endear

—of the well-nigh intolerable pressure and burden of such a lonely existence as his. He said that the only hope he was conscious of was a hope that he was still, however faintly, remembered at Beech Holmes; and that the volumes which would accompany his letter—such as they were, he had poured his very life into them, he said—and which he begged Mrs. Southern to allow her daughter Felicia to accept—might be read with some little pleasure and interest there, and might bear some slight testimony to the gratitude and affection with which the writer recalled happy days spent both there and in town with his kind friends, who were his only friends.

Notices of Wilfred's books had been read at Beech Holmes before the books themselves arrived. The author had chosen that the copies intended for Felicia should

be bound after a fancy of his own, and this had occasioned some delay.

His letter, expressing, she thought, feelings in such strong contrast with any he ought to have entertained, was a shock to Mrs. Southern; its morbid, thankless, weakly miserable tone jarred on her healthy mind. It was not, she said to Felicia, his indifference to success that pained her; but that he showed himself ungrateful to the Giver of it, by indulging such feelings as those his letter expressed.

Poor Felicia felt rebuked, abashed: listening to her mother's condemnation, she stooped over her newly-arrived treasures to hide her burning cheeks and tearful eyes. In her heart pity contended with admiration—sorrow with triumph: her mother's words seemed to her stern, yet an inward consciousness of their partial truth humbled her painfully.

Mrs. Southern continued:—

"I fear Wilfred Mason will, after all, prove more a warning than an example—a warning of the worthlessness and vanity of all gifts to one not reconciled with God and resigned to His will—instead of an example of the noble use of noble gifts, and of the power a courageous and God-fearing man has over what people call fate and circumstances. Instead of proving that a man may become great and good in spite of disadvantages of birth and parentage, he will, I fear, be another victim to morbid, exaggerating apprehension of conventional prejudice. This is what I fear for him. He seems to me determined to be miserable: there is something childish in the way he harps upon his friendlessness, and yet neglects to make any exertion, either to retain the friends he has, or to make himself new ones."

Mrs. Southern sometimes talked till she said rather more than she meant: this was likely to be the case now. But meeting a startled, imploring look from Felicia, who understood little except that Wilfred was blamed for not being happy, she added:—

"Do not look so grieved, dear child. I do not wish to be harsh—I do not mean to say that no allowances ought to be made for poor Wilfred, but——."

"Dear mamma," Felicia interposed, in a soft, pleading, voice, "I think I should be very, very unhappy if I had no mother, no brother, no sisters—no one at all to love me. I do not think anything could make up to me for that—or that I could rejoice over any good fortune, if there were no one to rejoice with me. Then Wilfred says that he is ill. If he has no one to talk to, and is ill and unhappy, isn't it natural that he should tell you about it? Read

his books, mamma dear; I think you will own he must have been brave and good while he wrote them. Can people who have no one to love them help being unhappy sometimes? I am sure I could not."

Felicia's eyes were full of tears — her hands lingered caressingly on Wilfred's volumes.

"Part of my complaint against Wilfred is that he doesn't seek to have people to love him. But, Felicia, I hoped that my dear little daughter felt it impossible to be unhappy. Any one whose heart is with God, and whose will is His will, should feel it so."

"I do not seem to know anything about being unhappy — I have never had anything to try me; but, mamma, if sorrow were to come to me, ought it not to be easier to me to feel rightly, than to any one who had been less happy?

Has not your love been a sort of proof to me of God's love? Yet, if I were to lose you—oh, mamma! I cannot think of that!" Her eyes seemed to widen in an effort to see the magnitude of such a loss.

Mrs. Southern took Felicia into her arms, and said, soothingly:—

"Perhaps I spoke a little hardly of Wilfred—his letter disappointed me greatly; he is so highly gifted—his nature has so much that is truly beautiful in it—that I grow angry and impatient with him for being less than altogether noble."

A kiss closed the conversation.

Everybody in the house read Wilfred's books before Felicia read them. They understood her so little as to wonder at her want of eagerness. When free family discussion was busy with their contents, Felicia would slip quietly away.

At last, when the volumes were all her own, when everybody else had finished reading and discussing them, she carried them off to her own little room, and lived in them there. Wilfred's thoughts became her thoughts. Every word of his had a peculiar sacredness for her. Of his poems, there were some she was for ever saying over to herself. She accepted all he wrote: some things she liked better than others, but she never thought of judging or comparing; and she did not love to listen when others did this—what she did not understand she was content to take on faith.

Mrs. Southern had been the first to speak in admiration of Wilfred's books—to own that there was hardly a touch of bitterness or morbidness in them—that the sentiments were noble, the language eloquent, the style vigorous. Into those

books he had poured the health and strength gathered from Welsh sea-breezes, and from the air of Welsh mountains—had poured all out with spendthrift haste, and had left himself completely bankrupt.

CHAPTER XII.

"'Twere better not to breathe or speak,
Than cry for strength, remaining weak,
And seem to find, but still to seek.

Moreover, but to seem to find
Asks what thou lackest—thought resign'd,
A healthy frame, a quiet mind."

WILFRED carried a heavy weariness—very little expectation of enjoyment, or capacity for it, abroad with him. He spent the winter in Italy; and from thence—because utter idleness was burdensome—he sent home various stories, sketches, and poems to the editor of the miscellany in which his first published tale had appeared. These things were almost all languidly

imagined and listlessly executed; there was no freshness or foreignness of atmosphere about them; they were developments of ideas which had lain in his brain before he left London, feeble and half-stifled developments—for his mind, unconsciously to himself, was ever receiving new impressions, and resented the forced labour of dealing with old things.

He was disappointed by what he interpreted as the want of suggestiveness of his life. Nothing seemed to him new or unfamiliar; it was as if in a dream he were revisiting the scenes of some former existence, conscious that it was only in a dream, and yet unable to dissipate the dream-haze and wake to realities.

He lingered abroad till—after a winter and summer had been spent in Italy, Switzerland, and Germany—the lowness of his funds warned him that it would be

prudent to turn homewards; as anything like steady application or regular work seemed impossible among unfamiliar scenes. October found him basking in the sunshine on the deck of a Rhine steamboat; watching the shifting panorama of wooded or vine-clad, castle-crowned heights, and listening to the babble of German conversation. It happened, the season being so far advanced, that he was the only Englishman on board.

The alternations between the expression of high-flown sentiments—extravagant professions of love for their father-land, extravagant praises of the beauty of the glorious Rhine—and calls for butter-brods, coffee, wine, beer, fruit, and sausage-sandwiches, half amused, and half disgusted the fastidious Englishman: the smile on his lips was ertainly not a particularly amiable one.

At this period Wilfred greatly resembled Schiller, as we know him through Goethe's description of him. He was proud-looking in form, mien, and carriage; only his eyes were soft — they were wonderfully soft: sometimes they seemed to be merely, with the most absolute humility, seeking for love; mourning its want, or its incompleteness.

At one of the prettiest spots on the river, the steamer had stopped to take in three persons who were awaiting it in a little boat. Wilfred, happening to stand near the ladder, naturally extended his hand to assist these passengers—a lady, a gentleman, and the lady's maid, to ascend it.

The lady made use of the proffered hand; she was passing on with a mechanical "Ich danke sehr," while her maid rewarded the stranger's politeness by a bewitching smile, when the gentleman, who

came last, looking full at Wilfred, uttered an exclamation which made her turn. Meeting her eyes, Wilfred at once recognized her; immediately recalled how, when, and where they had met before: but he himself—bronzed, disguised by a foreign-looking growth of hair, and dressed well and suitably—was not immediately to be recognized by a person who had seen him but once, and had then hardly taken the trouble to look at him.

"Eleanour! You have not forgotten your narrow escape at Abergwynn! This is the gentleman who saved your life there."

Miss Narpenth made full use of her large eyes before she spoke. At first she seemed to doubt the truth of her father's words.

"Saved my life, and then ran away from our troublesome gratitude: I remember," she said. "I have never been able to

get such another pony as my poor Mountaineer!"

"Not another who would peril your life by dashing into the sea when frightened! You are certainly to be condoled with!"

Miss Narpenth coloured slightly—perhaps she had associations with that period which made her colour readily; and the expression of Wilfred's face was unpleasantly sarcastic. She went on to say—

"You did not allow me the opportunity of personally expressing my gratitude to you in Wales. I offer you my hand now, Mr. ——. I do not think we ever knew your name."

It was Wilfred's turn to blush; he did so, through his bronzed hue, as he answered, "The name of Mason must supply the blank Miss Narpenth leaves."

Many years as he had borne this name, he still, in some moods, felt a pang of

shame when he gave it as his to any stranger; knowing that his only right to it was that of possessing no other. He bowed somewhat low over the offered hand, and his blush passed unnoticed.

When Miss Narpenth, assisted by her maid, had settled herself in a comfortable position—there had been a grand rising of a group of German students to make way for the handsome and distinguished-looking Englishwoman—Wilfred, who stood at a little distance, talking to her father, or rather, being talked to by him, looked at her with some curiosity.

Miss Narpenth was a fair brunette, if that term be allowable. In her eyes, hair, and complexion there was a rich golden glow; the warmer and more vivid the light, the more forcibly this was brought out; it was a tone resembling that given to everything by the sunshine of late afternoon in

late August. Exposure to a summer's air and sun had now greatly heightened the brilliancy of this effect. At the same time, as Wilfred had seen, Miss Narpenth's was one of the faces from which emotion can blot out all life, colour, and beauty. The white, still face he remembered was not to be recognized as the same face he looked at now; save by the eyes, which were singular: large, full without being prominent, and glowing, they suggested the idea of slumbering fires—of a nature in which it would be far easier to kindle than to subdue resentment.

As if to favour Wilfred's scrutiny, of which she seemed either unconscious or perfectly careless, Miss Narpenth laid aside her hat for a few moments—exposing thick, close coils of hair, not silky nor soft, and yet not coarse, but having an almost metallic strength and brightness; in colour,

dark, yet with a strong inclination to tawny auburn. The forehead, on which this hair grew rather low, was smooth, white, and well-expanded; but with brows of too heavy an arch, too nearly meeting over a nose, delicately formed, small and straight, the sensitive nostril of which seemed ready to express any passing emotion; the mouth was in keeping with the heavy brows, too full-lipped and too large; but the lips were soft and rosy, and their rare smile disclosed teeth dazzlingly white and perfectly formed. In spite of air and sunshine, the determined-looking chin, the blue-veined temples and the rather long throat, were of exquisite creamy, not snowy, fairness. Altogether, it was a perplexing face, with too many charms to be a very safe study. Apt to look sullen in repose, always ready to express haughty discontent, it could, nevertheless, arm itself with every fascination of beauty and in-

tellect; lighting up with flattering interest, or softening to the expression of tenderness, admiration, and love. It was a face that at its worst might look fiendish, at its best could never look angelic—a face that was handsome always, now and then beautiful; but not with such beauty as an inspired painter would dream of giving to a saint or a Madonna.

Miss Narpenth was rather tall, almost as tall as Wilfred; but when she did not remember to be listless, the graceful activity of her movements testified to a harmony of proportion that prevented her being looked upon as either tall or short. Her dress had the grace of appropriateness, and was characterized by a neatness and completeness which placed it in strong contrast with that of most of the German women on board—many of whom resembled bundles of heterogeneous garments, surmounted by human

heads; rather than properly built, merely clothed-upon women.

From the moment she stepped on deck, Miss Narpenth was the cynosure of many eyes; happening to drop a book of poems which she had with her, several hands were stretched out towards it. A tall, fair-haired, and somewhat wild-eyed young man, who was fortunate enough to secure it, presented it to her with an air of most profound respect; and then, on the strength of this introduction, tried to draw her into conversation. Poetry—English and German—was the subject he started. He did not find it difficult to interest Miss Narpenth—she was perfectly at home in German literature; while he himself was tolerably versed in that of England. He seemed to throw his whole heart and soul into the subject—quoting Goethe, Schiller, Uhland, Rückert, Geibel, and Chamisso freely and firily; and

wounding himself the while, as he believed irrecoverably, against the fine eyes, the brilliant smile, the varying colour and expression of the "wunderschöne, talentvolle Engländerinn."

A blue-eyed Clärchen, to whom he had previously devoted himself, watched him with mild despair in her heart, and innocent tears in her wide eyes. Wilfred, catching snatches of the conversation as he paced the deck with Mr. Narpenth, was astonished at the animation and freedom of the dialogue carried on with a stranger; and, while he admired Miss Narpenth's clever talk, and perfectly fluent and correct German, mentally accused her of a want of womanly reticence; a want of that self-restraint which exercises a restraining power over others. When a bell rang, signifying that the mid-day table-d'hôte awaited the passengers, the poetical young German was not behind his

countrymen in obeying the summons. The three English travellers were the last to enter the saloon, and Miss Narpenth was placed between Wilfred and her father.

Amused at the fiercely-sentimental glances directed towards his neighbour from the far end of the table, Wilfred commented upon them to her; adding, dryly, that she had seemed to find the young German interesting.

"He is clever—rather a remarkable young man, I should think," Miss Narpenth answered. Then she said:—

"Your tone makes me imagine that you find in that fact, of my having been interested by a stranger, something not in accordance with your notions of propriety. Is it so?"

"I should not presume to condemn anything in Miss Narpenth, or to express a doubt of the propriety of her conduct."

"You don't approve of a lady's allowing herself to be drawn into conversation by a young man to whom she has not been 'introduced,' perhaps?"

Wilfred made no answer to these scornfully uttered words; and his companion asked, in the same tone—

"Do you find life so very amusing that you can afford to throw away any chance of being entertained?"

"Has not 'life' yet shown Miss Narpenth a fairer side than that which it seemed to have presented to her when I saw her first?"

Miss Narpenth's painfully vivid blush made Wilfred feel that his question had been indiscreet—perhaps cruelly so. He did not ask pardon in so many words, but he bestowed one of the humblest glances of his soft eyes upon his neighbour. Her eyes just met it, and then drooped.

There was a brief silence. Miss Narpenth broke it by saying, in a different tone from that in which she had before spoken—

"I have one excuse to offer for having allowed myself to be interested in my conversation with a young man to whom I have not been introduced; which is, that he spoke with enthusiasm of a book by an author whose writings interest me extremely. I was surprised that a foreigner should have met with it, but my friend says that he is but lately returned from London. Perhaps you do not read fiction?"

"Rarely."

"Have you seen a novel called 'Endurance and Resistance?' Its author has written a great deal in one of the first periodicals. He has also published a volume of short poems: I have them with me, and I shall be happy to lend the book to you if you do not know it already."

"I know the novel and the poems. Now, do you really so greatly admire that novel?"

Wilfred looked into Miss Narpenth's eyes with a well-assumed expression of cold curiosity.

"I do!—though you ask in quite an intimidating way. I think it most powerfully written, and its truth comes home to me in so many ways. I have a strong interest in all the author of that book writes, and a strong wish to know him personally; I have never felt the same interest in any other living writer. But I do think that his novels and tales have one great defect—everything in them about love, and much in them about women, is so coldly ideal; the heroines do not in the least interest me—they are angels, and not women."

"The defect you mention is a great one."

"Do you agree with me that it exists?"

"No doubt you are right. I am inclined to think highly of your powers of penetration."

"What an unsatisfactory person you are! I cannot tell whether you are laughing at me or whether you are serious. Do you know anything about the writer? He seems to be a mysterious person. I have so much wished to see him, or even to hear about him, and I have not been able to do either. Do you know him?"

"No doubt he is, like other authors, to be heard of at his publisher's."

"*Do* you know him?" persisted Miss Narpenth.

"Intimately," Wilfred answered—his eyes bent on his plate as he spoke.

"Pray tell me all you know of him!"

"Rather a difficult task!" Lifting his glance to Miss Narpenth's, Wilfred was

dangerously assailed by the sweet flattery of her genuinely eager interest.

"What a frigid, sententious person you are!" she said. "It is evident my hero is no hero for you: perhaps he is a rival of yours; or ——"

She stopped suddenly—Wilfred looked up to ascertain the cause; again their eyes met; his shrank from the contact of hers, and so betrayed him. She blushed very vividly.

There was an awkward silence. Miss Narpenth spoke first, quite softly and timidly—

"If I have been rudely inquisitive, and have discovered what you wished to conceal, I beg your pardon. Have I discovered what you really desired should be a secret? Are you displeased with me?" The last question was asked in quite a humble tone of deprecation.

Wilfred felt it incumbent on him to try and put Miss Narpenth at her ease. He could not help feeling kindly towards one who had expressed so much interest in him, and so much admiration for his productions. Her face now, softened to humility and sweetness, for the first time struck him as beautiful; and her manner was pleasing, even fascinating, now that it was stripped of its assumed air of easy indifference, and shadowed by that reverence which women are so apt to entertain for men gifted with literary power; while they so often withhold it from others who have more worthy and solid claims upon it.

After watching Wilfred and Miss Narpenth for some time during the conversation, apparently of great mutual interest, which ensued, the young German presently rose abruptly and stormed from the saloon.

He was by-and-by seen tearing up and down the deck, smoking furiously, and staring wildly heavenwards. The fair Englishwoman, however, had no more attention to bestow on him; and when he was at last convinced of this he returned to his former allegiance to the clear-eyed and easily-forgiving Clärchen.

When evening came on Mr. Narpenth took refuge below early: but Miss Narpenth and Wilfred paced the deck slowly to and fro—sometimes talking, but often pausing to lean over the side and note the calm beauty of the evening and the scene—long after daylight had quite departed.

Wilfred and the Narpenths took up their quarters at the same hotel that night: Wilfred woke next morning with a new feeling—with a sense of having something to look forward to; of having some fresh interest in life; of knowing that there was

some one near who took an interest in him. Miss Narpenth was gracious and gentle as on the previous evening — though he had fancied that her softened mood would be but of short duration. When he found that the Narpenths' route could not be his—as they designed spending some weeks in Paris, and he was obliged to hasten to London — he was greatly disappointed; and yet he had a dim consciousness that it was best. So, with the blank feeling of a pleasure lost, came also a feeling of danger escaped.

After a day or two spent together they parted.

"We shall be in England in six weeks from this time," Mr. Narpenth said: "I have written my full address in town on this card; you will hear of me there— even if we should be at Thorndon House. You say that you have no address to

give me, so you must visit us on our return. In six weeks, remember."

"Unless you promise to do so, Mr. Mason, I have a feeling that we shall see nothing of you — that you disappear and reappear at pleasure; that we may never be able to hunt you out. I think I have a claim upon you: you saved my life, and I think you ought to do something towards rendering it ——." She paused for a second or two, and then "endurable" was the word she chose to use. She spoke with assumed lightness, but there was repressed earnestness in her beautiful eyes.

"I shall eagerly desire to avail myself of Mr. Narpenth's kindness."

Wilfred spoke what he felt at the time; though his after-conduct gave the lie to what he said. Those words, his parting "auf wiedersehen," and the glance accompanying both, occupied Miss Narpenth a

good deal more than a few days since she would have believed it possible any such words or glances could.

"A young man of singularly pleasing address, when he throws off his reserve!" was Mr. Narpenth's comment on Wilfred. His daughter did not contradict him.

"I know I was in a very desperate and cynical mood when I saw Mr. Mason before," she mused; "still I wonder he did not even then make some slight impression upon me. What singularly powerful eyes he has! They are very peculiar in expression, seeming to contradict all the rest of his face; very peculiar in colour, too, so that when he lifts them up, it is quite a surprise to see that softly dark violet, where one expected to see black or brown; and yet, peculiar as they are, I think—I fancy—that they remind me of some other pair of eyes—though whose I cannot tell."

Leaning back luxuriously in the corner

of a railway-carriage, Eleanour Narpenth thought a long while about these singularly beautiful eyes.

"Papa! did you say that Mrs. Lister was to meet us in Paris on our arrival?" she abruptly asked of her father, who sat opposite, busy with the paper.

"Mrs. Lister! Yes, in Paris, on our arrival. I hope you will suit each other," he added, letting the paper drop upon his knees; "you say you used to like her. I thought myself that there was something a little odd about her. She put several questions to me, about different people, which gave me the idea that she was trying to find out something about some person after whom she did not choose to ask directly; but when I asked if she had any English friends, thinking I should like to obtain more information about her, she replied haughtily that she had lived so long abroad

that I must engage her only on the recommendation of her foreign friends, or not at all. She had previously admitted that my name was not unknown to her before she knew you. When or how she became acquainted with it I did not discover; but she was evidently rather anxious that I should engage her. As I said before, I hope you will suit each other."

His daughter appearing to take but slight and languid interest in the matter, Mr. Narpenth resumed his paper, and dismissed Mrs. Lister from his mind.

Return to one's home and country may be very delightful when one has a home and friends to welcome that return; but for Wilfred returning to London, after a year's absence, to be welcomed by nothing warmer or more cheering than a London fog, was a dismal affair.

On his arrival in town, he found all MSS. he had forwarded from abroad awaiting him at the office of the journal to which they had been sent — without exception, condition, or explanation, they were declined by the editor.

Having looked them through, the author straightway justified the editor's decision by burning them every one.

"I have had my day—I have worn myself out, or I never could have penned such feeble, worthless, mawkish stuff," was his comment, as he did so. "I suppose I have used up what good stuff there was in me," he added; "if so, what remains for me to do?"

How he answered this question, how he dragged through that winter, it is not easy to say, nor pleasant to think.

When the time came at which Mr. Narpenth had assured Wilfred that he

should be again in town, the fickle and careless Wilfred had lost the card on which Mr. Narpenth had written his address; and had also utterly lost any inclination to follow up the acquaintance.

"It is all very well to be admired and flattered by a clever and beautiful woman, like Eleanour Narpenth," he admitted to himself, "but I have no fancy for being an object of her pity or patronage. I can imagine that there are women whose loving pity, poured into the wounds of a man's pride and ambition, may act as healing balm; but I am sure that Miss Narpenth is not one of these: her compassion would be, not oil upon troubled waters, but oil added to devouring flames. If I am ever again prosperous, I may then, perhaps, wish to seek her out, and further sun myself in the light of those really glorious eyes—but,

for the present, I would rather that they did not shine upon me."

Perhaps this winter was the most miserable winter Wilfred ever spent; not that he suffered from cold or hunger, or any outward privation—he did not.

Writing down to the level of uninstructed minds, and seeking to gratify uncultivated and unrefined tastes—writing to order for an inferior class of publications, under a strict promise of secrecy, which he knew to be worth little—he met with a success which he felt, and rightly felt, to be deeply humiliating.

At this time he was conscious of a gradual, but sure, deterioration of his whole nature. He was humbled in his own eyes; and this humbling was of a degrading, embittering kind. It made him moody and resentful; in time it might

make him coarse and callous. It seemed to him that it was now his very self that dragged him down, and not anything in his outward circumstances. Believing that he no longer believed in the possibility of happiness high and holy as he had dreamt of — or in the possibility of leading a high and holy ideal life without happiness—and never having realized the other possibility, that a life of exalted endurance and untiring effort may make its own happiness within itself, or find it in the happiness of others—he now abandoned himself to that sceptical indifference which urges its victim to seize what pleasure life offers, and not to pry too closely into its nature—to live as the world lives, and not set up an ideal standard, the straining to attain to which robs a man's days of savour, his nights of rest, turns his hair grey before its time,

and makes existence a burden and a weariness.

The devil, however, is not all-wise; for some souls he does not choose the right bait—some natures have not the aptitude for finding delight in the low pleasures of sin and sense—for finding any pleasure, delight, love, or rest, save in things so high that they do not hope ever to attain unto them.

Happy are perhaps those unhappy ones who are ever driven on by the inward impulse; who find no rest, no love, delight, nor pleasure on those soft, sunny, lower levels where they would fain lie down and take their ease; but, though the flesh is weak, are compelled, by the merciless, unresting spirit, to toil onwards towards the difficult hills, whose summits look cold, barren, and cheerless—on whose slopes the dear, cheery work-a-day sun does not

appear to shine, and in whose nooks and hollows no happy hearth-fires glow.

Was Wilfred one of these unhappy happy ones?

CHAPTER XIII.

"A spot of dull stagnation without light
Or power of movement, seem'd my soul
'Mid onward sloping motions infinite
Making for one sure goal."

"Dass ich werden dürfte wie dieser Tagelohner einer!" was the exclamation which broke from Wilfred, as he stood in the middle of a lonely country road; looking with an air half-intent, half-abstracted, at some objects by its side. These objects were a heap of half broken-up stones, on which lay a pick-axe and a labourer's jacket. He had maintained his contemplative attitude for a considerable time.

After a glance to the right and left — showing him the unvaried solitariness of the white road which he could see stretching away far into the distance on either hand—he took off his coat and hat, placed them by the labourer's jacket, took up the pick-axe, and began to work. His tool invariably fell wide of the mark, and fragments of stone flew up into his face; but he continued to work with unflagging energy, till he inflicted a somewhat severe blow upon his leg. Then, the pick-axe still in his hand, he leant back among the brambles growing against a low wall of loose stones.

"Not even fit for this," he said, gloomily.

When the first sickening pain had passed off, however, he fell to work again. Finding himself rather less awkward now, he grew far too eager over

his occupation to hear the approach of an easy-rolling carriage. As it passed between him and the sunshine he involuntarily looked up; it contained two ladies—they both wore veils; but, when one of them leant forward and bowed to Wilfred, through their light lacy screen, he believed that he recognized the eyes of Eleanour Narpenth.

The carriage had passed before he had in any way returned the lady's salutation; Miss Narpenth having checked a momentary impulse to stop it, as she remembered that in the presence of the coachman and footmen it would not be quite pleasant to enter into familiar conversation with a man whom they had seen breaking stones on the road.

During the greater part of her drive Miss Narpenth meditated uneasily on the strangeness of this encounter; she speculated

whether Wilfred could possibly, by any chance or change of fortune, be "on the roads" professionally: this hypothesis being too disagreeable to be entertained, she decided to regard what she had seen as a mere freak of eccentric genius.

Meanwhile Wilfred resumed his hat and coat, and limped from the spot; when Miss Narpenth repassed it about an hour afterwards she saw the pick-axe wielded by its real owner.

Sickness and consequent poverty had driven Wilfred from London itself; but he felt obliged to remain near it. He would not have chosen the neighbourhood of Thorndon as a retreat, had he known that the Narpenths had a house there. Yet it had been Mr. Narpenth's having once mentioned Thorndon House (as Wilfred now remembered his having done) which had given him that feeling of pleasant and

puzzling familiarity with the name of the village that had attracted him to it.

It was not, therefore, altogether chance, though it was further still from being choice, that had led Wilfred into Miss Narpenth's vicinity.

Feeling himself thoroughly unprosperous—beginning to believe himself to be that most miserable of human beings, one who has mistaken his vocation—fancying now that he had never possessed genius, or anything more than quite ordinary talent, and that his only inspiration had been his misery, and that fire and energy of youth which was already burnt out — he had come to Thorndon that he might breathe free, fresh air, while he resolved on his future course.

The time was indeed come when he envied the labourer on the roads his definite day's work. Resolved to break

free from the debasing slavery into which he had sold himself, and which he now loathed, he believed that he was prepared to subsist on dry bread, and to pass his nights without shelter, rather than return to it. As yet, however, he was not obliged to test his resolution so severely; he carried a small portion of the spoils of the Egyptian taskmasters into his free estate.

On this autumn afternoon Wilfred walked towards the cottage where he lodged with an irritated consciousness of the absurdity of the position in which Miss Narpenth had surprised him; yet neither this unpleasant consciousness, nor his former distaste to being an object of her pity, was the chief reason which made him contemplate a flight from her neighbourhood: he felt both that at this turn in his life Miss Narpenth's influence would

be a baneful one, and that she was a woman who could not remain without influence over those with whom she came in contact. Wilfred was indolent, however; he contented himself with resolving to avoid the high-road, where he had been seen by Miss Narpenth; he consoled himself with the idea that the humbleness of his retreat—a common labourer's dwelling—ensured him against discovery—how should she even know that he was living at or near Thorndon?

But Miss Narpenth was not to be easily eluded: enquiries set on foot in the village soon made her acquainted with the fact that a strange gentleman had for some time lodged at the cottage of a widow Greenman.

Within two days of the encounter on the road Wilfred received an invitation to dine at Thorndon House—an invitation so

cleverly worded that his best feelings seemed to make it impossible for him to refuse it; besides which, he thought that there would be something ignominious and cowardly in doing so. He could leave Thorndon shortly after having availed himself of this one invitation, without there being anything particularly ungracious in his conduct.

"Where is Thorndon House?" he enquired of the woman of the cottage.

"Over yon, sir; you may see the smoke through the trees. It's Squire Narpenth's; I've heard tell he's got as big a house in London, and another in Wales—he's a banker, and main rich, I fancy!"

So the great house among the trees—from which he had often watched the up-curling smoke as he lounged away his weary days on the low-wooded hill near

the cottage—was the dwelling of Eleanour Narpenth!

A review of his wardrobe showed Wilfred that he had clothes in which he should be quite presentable; more especially as he knew that any shortcomings from the standard of present fashion would be regarded by Miss Narpenth, as no doubt the stone-breaking had been regarded—merely as an outbreak of the "eccentricity of genius."

"Genius!" Wilfred repeated, as he sat in his miserable little room, resting his head on his hands, and with his eyes fixed on Miss Narpenth's note. "Genius!—she believes that I have it, and I dreamt so once. How far off those days of delirious delight and illusion are! I am still a young man, not thirty yet, and I seem to have had my day—to have lived my life. How must I fill up the years to come? How do

men who never had the life I have lost, fill up their years—years made up of such a weary multitude of days? Most men have two lives—one the sweetener of the other: two lives, one the outward bread-winning life, the other the sacred family life—the life in others dearer than themselves—their wives and children. If it might ever be thus with me! I could, I think, be very happy doing very humble work, if——"

Here thought grew very vague; but presently he continued:—

"Will the man whose life stands between me and the possibility of such happiness live till the knowledge his death gives me is valueless? Yet what can that knowledge *profit* me? He said, 'it was not well that you should be *branded* with your father's name.' Branded! Perhaps it is well that bitter word escaped him; or I might have been tempted to pray for his death. No doubt

the bitter word was a just word—he hated my father, but he never lied. Well! I must just live on with what patience I may. Life may be long, but each day shortens it. Each night that falls blots out something from the weary sum of time. Happiness, that dream and desire of my youth, flies from me further and further, and I lose even my visionary belief in her; and yet," he added, raising his head, and sudden fire flashing through the haze of his languid eyes, "I shall surely know her before I die."

Straying out into the sun presently, his craving for companionship led him to the hedges, where the village children were picking blackberries: he passed an hour or two in helping them, hooking down the branches above their reach, and greatly aiding to fill their baskets. When a little girl belonging to a neighbouring cottage

got badly scratched, and had to be carried home to her mother, Wilfred undertook the charge of her; then, finding it was late enough to begin preparing for his visit to Thorndon House, he did not return to the blackberrying party.

To his own surprise, he found that he anticipated pleasure from his visit: he was tired of himself; tired of his rough lodging and coarse fare—tired of seeing only homely faces, and of hearing only homely speech. He was inclined to seize any kind and degree of pleasure that offered; without too curiously examining whether it appealed to sense or spirit.

Thorndon House was a large, square, ordinary-looking British mansion; surrounded by smooth lawns, trim shrubberies, well-kept carriage-drives, and well-gravelled paths—all enclosed within a high wall, and sheltered at the back by some

finely-grown elms. It was furnished with admirably-stocked greenhouses and hot-houses; the flower-beds glowed with autumn flowers; everything had a modern, highly-preserved, prosperous look. Nothing he saw could have reminded Wilfred of Beech Holmes; it could only have been the force of contrast that sent his thoughts to that picturesquely-beautiful and ruinous place.

Long afterwards, to recall his feelings as he ascended the steps and waited at the hall door of Thorndon House that day—to recall the impressions he then received from unfamiliar things which were destined to become so familiar—was like recalling a dream.

Wilfred was ushered into a large and empty drawing-room; facing south-west it was full of warmth, colour, light, and fragrance: flowers, pictures, statuettes, richly-bound books and richly-coloured dra-

peries seemed to blend into a general atmosphere of subdued beauty—at least so it struck one much accustomed to whitewashed walls, or to the various ugliness and dinginess of cheap lodgings.

His soft exclamation "Ah!" was a long drawn breath of pleasure, as he looked round the apartment, inhaled the perfumed air, felt the thick soft carpet beneath his feet, and watched the late sunlight streaming in.

One of the windows stood open ; near it was a small inlaid table, before which was placed an easy chair ; on the table was a piece of delicate embroidery, with a needle in it, as if it had been just thrown down ; also a writing-case, a vase of splendid roses, and one or two books. Wilfred approached this table reverently—to recoil as from a snake among flowers, on finding that an open volume, half-con-

cealed by the work lying on it, was a copy of his poems—the same that Miss Narpenth had had with her abroad.

"A trap laid for an author's vanity—she must be tired of them by this time!" Muttering this to himself he smiled contemptuously.

Miss Narpenth entering at this moment, Wilfred met her with a manner of cold and guarded reserve. She noticed this; after her first frank greeting she coloured, glanced inquiringly at his grave face, and then her manner, too, became somewhat formal.

As she had appeared on first coming into the room, a bright smile of pleasure and welcome on her lips and in her eyes, Wilfred had thought her even more strikingly handsome than he remembered to have thought her before. Dressed to perfection—as regarded taste and fashion,

though perhaps too richly for the occasion —no doubt she impressed him the more from the fact that his eyes had starved upon rustic awkwardness and coarseness long enough to have an unnaturally keen appetite for cultivated grace and beauty. Miss Narpenth, too, seemed in such perfect harmony with everything surrounding her, that it appeared as if the "central idea" of all this luxury must have been wanting before she came into the room.

When the first greetings were over, and Wilfred and his hostess were both seated, they felt at a loss to know what to say: remarks about the weather and the neighbourhood sounded absurd to Eleanour, when there were so many subjects of interest on which she longed to question her companion.

Wilfred broke a short silence by saying:—

"Till you drove past me the other day, and did me the honour of bowing to me, I did not know that you lived in this place; though afterwards I remembered that I might have known it. I had been puzzled to understand what association could make the name of Thorndon familiar to me."

"Perhaps you owe my greeting entirely to my surprise. I think it would only have been properly dignified if I had affected to have forgotten a gentleman who has shown so very little anxiety to be remembered."

"Believe me, that when we parted at Cologne I had every intention of availing myself of your father's kind hospitality—every desire to do so. On my return to town, unforeseen circumstances arose which interfered with the fulfilment of this intention. The loss has so evidently been entirely my

own, and the obstacles to the renewal of a pleasant intercourse were of so distasteful a kind, that I feel more inclined to claim Miss Narpenth's commiseration than to solicit forgiveness by making apologies which imply a consciousness of wilful transgression — of having sinned against her, instead of having only mortified myself."

The icy composure of Wilfred's manner as he made this speech repressed any expression of that commiseration for which it pretended to call. Miss Narpenth felt wonderfully little at her ease: it was a relief to her when her father arrived — rather late, as he explained, because, in obedience to Eleanour's instructions, he had come round by Wilfred's quarters; to ascertain if he had remembered his engagement at Thorndon House — "students and authors being proverbially forgetful of such

sublunary matters as dinner engagements."

After having welcomed his guest very cordially, Mr. Narpenth turned to the table by the window. Not seeing anyone there, he asked:—

"Where is Mrs. Lister?"

"I had a message from her while I was dressing to say that she begged to be excused from appearing at the dinner-table; as she was suffering from severe nervous headache."

"Has she had it all day, do you suppose?"

"She appeared as well as usual at lunch-time. It seems almost as if Mr. Mason had been guilty of producing her headache. I happened to bring your poems downstairs this afternoon," Miss Narpenth added, turning to Wilfred; "when I left the room, Mrs. Lister, who had not seen them before, was reading them very

intently. She had not then complained of indisposition."

Dinner was announced as ready. Wilfred, glad to exonerate Eleanour from the sin of having left that book open, offered her his arm with a more friendly expression than he had yet shown her. After some slight speculation in his own mind, he decided rightly that this Mrs. Lister must be Miss Narpenth's duenna, or *dame-de-compagne.*

Accustomed for sometime to partake with what appetite he might of clumsily-prepared and roughly-served food, Mr. Narpenth's dining-room and dining-table appointments struck Wilfred as epicurean in their refined luxury and elegance.

The twilight was shut out by crimson curtains; the small oval dining-table, drawn near a clear-burning fire, but protected from it by a screen of plate-glass; had nothing on

it but pleasantly-shaded lights, glass, plate, china, and a large vase of flowers; the dishes were carved at the sideboard, and handed round by a noiseless footman, assisted by a good-looking maid-servant. The host being free from cares of carving, and the hostess from anxiety as to the symmetrical arrangement of the dishes, conversation flowed on evenly and pleasantly.

To a question from Wilfred as to whether they had been abroad this year, Mr. Narpenth answered:—

"Eleanour did not care to go away from Thorndon; she said she was tired of travelling and tired of 'furrin parts,' and that she should like to try a summer and autumn spent quietly in the country."

"And have you enjoyed the change? Has the experiment proved a successful one?" Wilfred asked Miss Narpenth.

"During the last six months I have

perhaps yawned more than in all my life before: that is answer sufficient, I think."

"My daughter is a spoilt child, and very hard to please!"

"The surprise your occupation of the other day caused me was a delightfully novel sensation, I assure you, Mr. Mason. I feel deeply grateful to you for it."

"What! the occupation of stone-breaking? How came that about?" questioned Mr. Narpenth, laughingly.

"I am in want of a profession," Wilfred gravely replied, "and I was trying my qualifications for that of a roadman. I only discovered disqualifications: I am still slightly lame from a blow I inflicted upon my knee."

"Eleanour can hardly afford to laugh at you," her father remarked. "Looking out of my window, just after daybreak one summer morning, I saw her digging vigo-

rously in the vegetable garden at the back of the house—with what object do you suppose?"

"Papa! I thought you promised me not to tell that story!"

"Did I? I had forgotten; but I did not begin till the servants were gone. Can you guess her motive, Mr. Mason? She had been struck with the cheerful, contented look of some women who work in the fields close by: she wished to see if to work meant to be cheerful and contented!"

"What was the result of your exploit?" Wilfred asked, looking at Miss Narpenth with more interest than he had felt in her yet.

"The results were sore hands, stiff arms and shoulders, intense tiredness for the rest of the day (I do not know though that it was an unpleasant kind of tiredness), and,

worst of all, a soiled dress, the state of which greatly excited the curiosity of my maid. I chose that early hour, because it was real hard work I wanted to try, and I wished to elude the comments of the servants' hall—but that is an impossible thing to do. Do you remember what Thackeray says in 'Vanity Fair' of the Heimgericht held in the servants' hall. I suppose it is true that we are all slaves to some one thing or person; yet I should think that you, Mr. Mason, are an exception to this rule: you must be enviably free—free to be and do what you like, and to go where you like."

"Is it not generally the case that those who are not slaves to others, and to things external, are apt to be slaves to something within themselves? Freedom is a thing we all talk about, and of which none of us know anything."

Miss Narpenth did not answer; the blush that had been called into her face by her father's story was slow to fade. She soon rose to go to the drawing-room. Wilfred, holding the door open for her, felt a sense of pleasure in observing her stately grace— a thrill of novel pleasure from the contact of her rustling dress, as she passed him, and from the glance and smile with which she thanked him.

"You take no wine, I see, Mr. Mason, and you will, perhaps, prefer having coffee in the drawing-room. I should like you just to look at a few of Eleanour's paintings; may I trouble you to follow me?"

Mr. Narpenth led the way to an apartment of very studio-like appearance; in it there were a good many framed pictures— some of them being copies, some from original sketches—and several unframed canvases, but all were turned with their

faces to the wall: though there was an unfinished picture on the easel, the room showed no signs of recent work.

"I do not pretend to be any great judge of pictures; but of course a man must pick up some knowledge about them, as about other things," Wilfred said, after a close scrutiny of one or two of Miss Narpenth's productions.

"And how do these strike you?"

"As showing a great deal of well directed, original talent. Has Miss Narpenth worked on this"—pointing to the picture on the easel—"recently?"

"She has not touched a canvas for several years; she gave up painting during the last summer we spent in Wales—the year when we first, and so opportunely, made your acquaintance. I am very anxious to see her take up her brushes again; their use was a great resource and amuse-

ment—and want of occupation is the great curse of young women's lives now-a-days, I think."

"I have ventured to take Mr. Mason into your studio, Eleanour," Mr. Narpenth said, as they joined his daughter in the drawing-room.

"It seems to me, Miss Narpenth, that your copies are much more carefully executed than your original works," Wilfred remarked, for the sake of breaking an awkward silence; which seemed to be one of displeasure on the lady's part, and of apprehension on her father's.

"Is not that very natural?"

"Perhaps—if it arise from diffidence as to the merits of your own compositions. May I hope some day by daylight to be allowed to look through your folios of sketches? I shall then expect to see new things, which have always more in-

terest for me than have the most perfect copies of old ones."

"You forget that 'there is nothing new under the sun.'"

"I remember that we are none of us acquainted with a millionth part of what lies under the sun; and as each nature has individuality, power to perceive something not to be perceived by other natures, and —if it is gifted with power of expression—to produce something not to be produced by other natures, may we not continually learn new things one from the other? Do not our most familiar thoughts sometimes seem strange to other minds; and the facts of other men's experience appear to us as fiction when first presented to ours?"

"But do you think that every nature *has* a distinctive individuality?"

"I do not know why we should doubt

it—why we should consider spirit likely to be less varied in its manifestation than matter — why we should not believe in infinite differences of souls, as well as in infinite differences of bodies. Can you imagine the existence of another being with sympathies so perfectly one with your own, that were it possible to exchange natures and retain self-consciousness (the consciousness of your former self) you would not experience a sense of all-pervading strangeness?"

Eleanour passed her hand over her brow in a laughing attempt to smooth out the thought-wrinkles.

"I cannot follow you," she said. "'Take some one else's nature, and yet retain one's own self-consciousness!'"

"I am not surprised that you cannot conceive the possibility of the impossible," Wilfred said, laughing. "All mysticism

apart, the fact is that I wish to be permitted to look through Miss Narpenth's sketches, and expect to receive much pleasure from doing so."

"Look in to luncheon to-morrow," Mr. Narpenth suggested.

Wilfred's eyes sought for Eleanour's permission.

"I shall be happy to show you my poor performances if you will do so; and I can then introduce you to the lady of whom you have heard us speak to-day—Mrs. Lister. She is an interesting person; and I often fancy must have a history, which, if you could find it out, might form a good subject for a novel."

"I do not think I have yet acquired the habit of taking a merely professional interest in my fellow-creatures," Wilfred replied, coldly.

"By-the-bye, my dear, do you know

if Mrs. Lister is better?" asked Mr. Narpenth.

"She is rather better. I told Ann to enquire when she took her up some tea. I daresay a night's rest will set her all right."

Then, conscious that something in her last speech to Wilfred had been distasteful to him, Miss Narpenth devoted herself to the endeavour of effacing the bad impression it had made. She turned the conversation to places they had both visited, and works of art they had both seen abroad; in speaking of the latter, she excited Wilfred's admiration by her discriminating appreciation of their merits. She not only entered into the subtlest refinements of his criticism; but sometimes, taking the initiative, she showed either that she went beyond him in enthusiasm, or that her taste was more highly cultivated. When she spoke of scenes and

objects of natural beauty, however, she pleased her listener less; with these she seemed to have no inward sympathy, and all she said in their praise sounded forced and superficial.

It was very late when Wilfred rose to go; but even then he seemed reluctant to depart, and Eleanour knew how to enchain him longer. For the last two hours the conversation had been a *tête-à-tête*. Mr. Narpenth had been dozing over the paper. Eleanour sat near the centre lamp, toying with some work; Wilfred, lounging near her in a low, luxurious chair, had watched the busy idleness of her beautiful hands, and the slipping to and fro of the bracelets on her smooth white arms, with a kind of indolent fascination; sometimes he forgot to talk, and had to be roused by a glance from her brilliant eyes, or a few sparkling words from her lips.

Even after he had once said "good-night," he lingered; leaning on the back of his chair.

"The scenes of our first, second, and third meeting differ widely!" he said, as his eyes returned from a circuit of the room to its attractive centre. "Have you any sketches of the Welsh coast near Abergwynn?"

"Only some very early ones. I had given up sketching before that strange meeting of ours; and between that summer and a summer we passed at Abergwynn, when I was not much more than a child, I was at school abroad."

Miss Narpenth coloured deeply as she spoke—why, Wilfred could not understand.

"If you ever paint from memory, that bay; overhung by lowering clouds; with wild surf breaking on its sandy curve; and the dismal beauty of the plain stretching between the sea and the hills——"

"Abergywnn offers fine subjects without doubt," Miss Narpenth broke in abruptly; "but I have given up painting. At least——"

Wilfred waited for the end of this sentence; but Eleanour drooped her head over her work, and did not finish it.

The small voice of a French clock just then made itself heard, striking twelve; Wilfred, at last, really departed. Mr. Narpenth, accompanying him to the house-door, reminded him of his promise to come and see Eleanour's sketches next morning; adding, "If you can revive her interest in painting, I really shall feel obliged to you."

The door was closed after Wilfred. He found himself alone; under a clear, star-lit sky: but in spite of the coolness and silence of night the influences of Thorndon House lingered about him—those of nature

did not penetrate through the atmosphere these made.

Reaching his cottage, it seemed more than usually redolent of unsavoury odours, those of onions and stale tobacco predominating; and to-night these things affected him more than usual—they greatly offended and disgusted him. His small, low sleeping-room, with its musty smell, seemed stifling. He flung the lattice open with a violence that shook out several loosened panes of glass; then, bending his head over some plants, a heliotrope, and a rose-scented geranium that stood on his sill, he closed his eyes, and allowed himself to think of Eleanour Narpenth—of her grace, and of her soft graciousness for him; of the elegance and luxury by which she was so fittingly surrounded.

The night air was chill; when by-and-by he lifted up and drew in his head,

opening his eyes to the meanness of his poor room—illumined by the dirty light of a candle flaring smokily, and guttering into the already grease-spotted candlestick—he experienced a very unpleasant revulsion of feeling.

CHAPTER XIV.

"Was man Geschick nennt, lässt sich nicht versöhnen."

WILFRED passed the next morning in looking forward to the afternoon. Restlessness had taken the place of listlessness—a sign, perhaps, that life had some unwonted interest; for those who fear nothing, hope nothing, and expect nothing, do not suffer from restlessness.

As he walked up the carriage-drive to Thorndon House, his glance swept the drawing-room windows, and showed him a lady seated near one of them—not Miss Nar-

penth he found, when he was ushered into the apartment; but a lady taller than Miss Narpenth, dressed in black, with a complexion of almost startling pallor. She rose as he entered—they exchanged bows, and he was struck with a certain eagerness, almost amounting to wildness, in her eyes.

Mrs. Lister—for so he concluded this lady was called—begging him to be seated, said she would tell Miss Narpenth, who she believed was in the garden, of his arrival. She laid the morning paper before him and crossed the room.

The servant having announced him as "Mr. Mason," Wilfred was rather surprised that Mrs. Lister paused before she reached the door, and asked—

"Who shall I tell Miss Narpenth desires to see her?"

Wilfred, from a consciousness that his Christian name alone was rightfully his, had

acquired a habit of using it on most occasions—he did so now.

"Mr. Wilfred Mason—but I am sorry to trouble you so far," he answered.

A suppressed cry, as of pain, startled him. He saw Mrs. Lister stagger, and clutch the handle of the door. In a moment he was by her side, and her clutch was transferred to his offered arm. She turned her face to his, looking at him with eyes that were at first sightless from the intensity of hungry effort to see—while the working of her features bore witness to some sharp inward struggle, as between death and life. When the mist cleared from before her vision, and she met Wilfred's alarmed and sympathising look, she tried to smile.

"It is nothing. I struck my foot—the pain made me feel faint—thank you!" she said.

She released his arm from her grasp, and

passed quickly out of the door which he held open for her. He returned to his seat, and to the perusal of the paper. In talking with Mr. Narpenth yesterday, he had found it inconvenient to be so entirely ignorant as he was on all topics of public interest; he had resolved to give some attention to these things for the future; but now he could not fix his thoughts on the columns, so much did the strangeness of Mrs. Lister's look and manner occupy him.

It was not long before Miss Narpenth entered through the conservatory, her hands and the hat which hung over her arm full of flowers. When she freed a hand to offer it to Wilfred, a shower of late autumn roses fell at her feet. Being young and poetical, it would have been odd if he could have assisted in picking up the scattered treasures without finding some-

thing pretty and appropriate to say about the flowers and the fair culler of them. His compliments were received with dignified pleasure.

"May I keep this one rose?" he asked, as he lifted the last—a flower of a peculiarly brilliant crimson, and of a rich and powerful perfume—from the ground.

"I have a sort of right to it," he added, having received permission to retain it—"for it has wounded me. Has it any distinctive name?"

Eleanour smiled rather consciously.

"Our old gardener believes it to be a variety of his own introduction," she answered, evasively.

"No doubt he has named it then?"

"He begged my permission to call it the 'Eleanour Narpenth.'"

"Your namesake has wounded me rather

deeply, Miss Narpenth," Wilfred said, examining his finger.

"I think the gardener paid me a doubtful compliment—for the tree is particularly thorny, and does not flower freely. Have you really done more than prick your finger, Mr. Mason? Really hurt it?"

"Indeed I have; a very large thorn is safely lodged in my flesh."

"Shall I give you a needle to try and extract it?" she asked, and carefully selected one from a case she took from Mrs. Lister's open work-box.

"May I venture to ask you to extract it for me?" he asked, holding out his hand towards her.

She took the hand in hers, examined the wound, and drew him towards the light, saying, as she did so:—

"Surely you have a right to ask me to do more than such a trifling service

for you, seeing that I owe my life to your courage and presence of mind. I do not think I am of a quite thankless nature!"

Perhaps her hand was not quite firm, or his trembled; at all events, the thorn was not easily extracted. Eleanour looked up once to see if she were giving him much pain; but there was a power in the intent glance that met hers which prevented her from repeating the experiment. It is certain that, after this exchange of looks, it was her hand which trembled.

The thorn had at last been extracted, and Wilfred was tendering his thanks to the fair operator, when Mrs. Lister came into the room; her quick glance seemed immediately to take note of Eleanour's blushing cheeks, and of the soft, perhaps involuntary, flattery of Wilfred's eyes.

Miss Narpenth, with a manner less com-

posed than usual, introduced Wilfred to her friend Mrs. Lister; and then they went into an adjoining room—a small breakfast parlour—to luncheon. Mrs. Lister spoke but little while they sat at table; and when they returned to the drawing-room, and Miss Narpenth's portfolios were brought in, she seated herself by a distant window, and did not, even by a look, take part in the conversation that ensued. This silent presence weighed upon Wilfred. At first Eleanour also seemed to feel it a restraint; but, after a time, she grew too much interested in her companion to remember Mrs. Lister, or any strangeness she might have noticed in her demeanour.

"I find that a poet is a most pleasant critic," Miss Narpenth said, by-and-by: "your imagination, Mr. Mason, supplies the deficiencies of my work—you discover beauties that cannot exist in the sketches themselves—

because I did not perceive them in nature, and, therefore, did not try to represent them."

"I do not think that your 'because' proves anything, Miss Narpenth. I think that a sketch or picture from the hand of a true artist will always have things in it that he was not conscious of trying to put into it—beauties and truths which are first seen and interpretated by intelligent criticism. Should not Art always be, to some extent, unconscious—though to say so may seem paradoxical? These companion sketches of yours, which I see you have called, 'Before the Storm' and 'After the Storm,' appear to me to be beautifully felt, and wonderfully true to nature. It was daring of you to take exactly the same scene, and represent it under the two aspects; but I think the result has justified the daring. One feels a sense of

oppression; a sense of something awful and threatening in the stillness, looking at the first drawing: while this other, with its pure, fair, tender tints; with its waters sinking to calm now after their late troubling; pervaded, as it seems to me, by a kind of penitent serenity—as if nature repented herself of her late passion—makes one grow quiet and peaceful as one gazes." Lowering his voice, he added, "One would almost long to have a fierce storm of trouble break over one's life were one assured that it would be followed by such profound and delicious calm — or to see a beloved face lowering with anger and distorted by passion, might it surely melt and soften afterwards to an expression of so exquisitely mild and beautiful a penitence."

Eleanour sighed "You will make me in love with my own work; you will wake

up my dead zeal—if dead things can wake —and if ——."

"May I venture to enquire why you gave up the use of so beautiful a gift?" Wilfred asked—when she did not complete her sentence. She coloured vividly, but did not look altogether displeased with the questioner. A quick, involuntary glance which she turned towards Mrs. Lister made Wilfred fancy that had they been alone his curiosity would have been gratified; but in this he was mistaken.

"My love of painting left me all at once, with other girlish follies or enthusiasms," she answered—"I do not know that I shall ever paint again."

"And yet," persisted Wilfred, "I fancy that you suffer from *ennui*—from want of interests and occupation. It is wrong to let your talent lie idle—you will not be happy and content while you do so; the

sense of possession of unused power is always burdensome. 'Was man nicht nützt ist eine schwere Last,' you know. But that it is a wonderful piece of arrogant presumption on my part to speak in this style, I am fully aware. Can you excuse my having done so?"

"I do not see that I have anything to excuse: I am grateful to you for speaking as you have done." Bending her head down over the drawings, she continued softly and hurriedly:—

"You are perfectly right; and, to own the truth, I often long to paint again; but once, when I was very miserable, and when I believed myself to be cruelly ill-used, I made a foolish vow, which, though I know it was foolish and wrong, I am now afraid to break."

"Did you vow never to paint again?"

"Never, unless something happened which

I believed never could happen. I know this must sound very absurd, and I give you leave to laugh at me." She lifted up a glowing face as she finished speaking, and set him the example by laughing scornfully; but Wilfred's face was perfectly grave.

"Miss Narpenth, is it not time that we dressed for dinner?" Mrs. Lister asked. Both Wilfred and Eleanour started at the harshly abrupt tone of the question.

"Surely it is not yet so late?" Miss Narpenth exclaimed.

"It is more than half-past five."

"You must see the contents of the second folio some other day, then, Mr. Mason. I find it exceedingly pleasant, Mrs. Lister, to have unknown beauties in my poor daubs introduced to my notice," she added, turning gaily to the lady she addressed.

"You have seen these drawings, I take

for granted?" Wilfred asked Mrs. Lister.

"Most of them. I am best acquainted with the earlier ones—sketches of foreign scenes which were executed under a foreign master."

"Mr. Mason has not seen those," Eleanour interposed, quickly.

"Do you not agree with me, that to call works of Art—especially sketches—suggestive, is to offer them the highest praise?"

With a drawing still in his hand, Wilfred addressed his question to Mrs. Lister: feeling as if he had been guilty of rudeness in leaving her so long unnoticed, and conscious of something unpleasant in the manner of both the ladies, he was anxious to draw her into conversation.

"It always seems to me," he continued, "that works of which the whole beauty, meaning, and force are seen, felt, or heard at once, must necessarily be of a low calibre."

"One very soon wearies of such works at all events; as one does of people without reticence, who turn their natures inside-out for every stranger's inspection."

It struck Wilfred that this remark of Mrs. Lister's was directed against Miss Narpenth. Perhaps Eleanour thought so, too; for when Mrs. Lister had left the room, she observed, in a tone of annoyance:—

"That lady is in a singular humour to-day."

Assisting to tie the strings of a folio, Wilfred said—more for the sake of giving a fresh turn to Miss Narpenth's thoughts, than from any very earnest desire in the matter—

"If I should be the direct or indirect means of re-awakening in you so great an interest in your art as shall lead you to break an ill-considered vow, I shall be much gratified."

"That is not likely," Eleanour answered, brusquely.

As she spoke, she looked at him with something of haughty defiance in her eyes and bearing. At this moment Mr. Narpenth arrived.

"Papa will insist on your staying to dinner," Eleanour observed; she already repented of her hasty haughtiness, as she saw Wilfred's face assume a wounded and surprised expression.

He answered her with a manner that mirrored her passing hauteur. Leaving him in her father's hands, she escaped to the duties of the toilette; confidently expecting to find him in the drawing-room on her return to it.

Mr. Narpenth was hospitably urgent, but Wilfred did not choose to remain. He passed his evening in abusing his folly for having indulged the sudden pique that

prompted him to refuse Mr. Narpenth's invitation; in speculating whether he had given Miss Narpenth any cause of offence; or whether ill-humour, caused by a personal application of Mrs. Lister's remark, was alone answerable for the rapid change from soft, confiding graciousness to an air of proud hostility. He weighed the possible reasons for this change; till, becoming angry with Eleanour—angry with himself, too, for thinking so much about her—he resolved that he would not go to Thorndon House again until he was particularly requested to do so. He had no intention of submitting submissively to being made the sport of a proud girl's caprices.

Ten days passed before he saw Miss Narpenth again; he had never spent five more uneasy, dissatisfied, restless days than were the first five of these. On

the sixth he set to work: not, however, to execute either of the orders—which, offering golden allurements, lay temptingly at hand—for that kind of composition which he had abjured. Sçenes and incidents of his life abroad—moods of thought that had been on him in various places, at various times of day or night—contrasted and harmonized aspects under which different objects had presented themselves to him, had been vividly recalled to his mind by his conversations with Miss Narpenth; in spite of his belief that, either, he had never possessed genius, or that it had left him, he set himself to endeavour to fix these revived impressions in a series of poems.

Apparently he had no longer any thought of soon leaving Thorndon.

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